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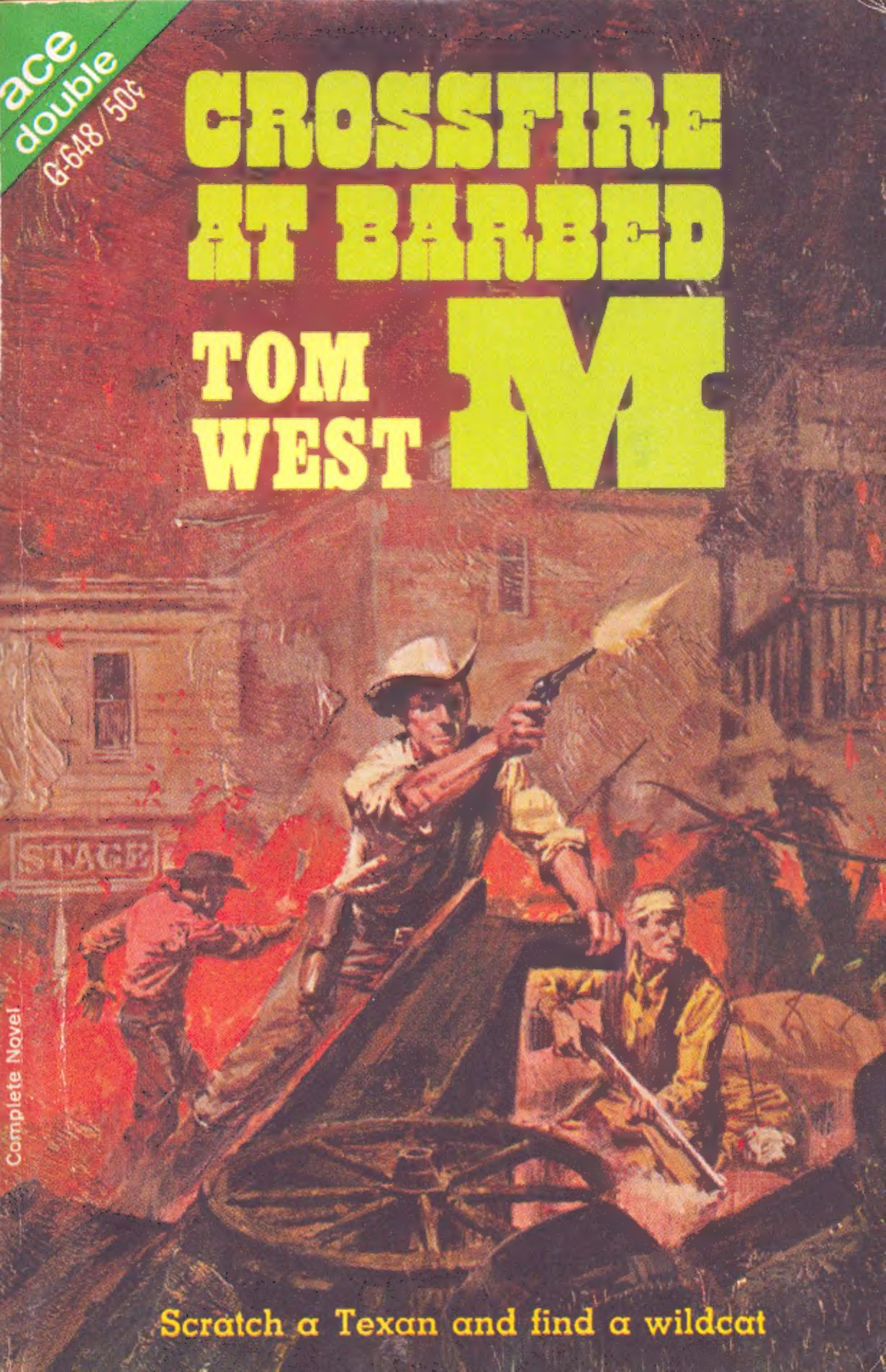
CROSSFIRE AT BARBED M

TOM WEST



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THE GRINGO VAQUERO

There was a fine line between being a gunman and a gunfighter, but Pecos John Parker was mighty particular about it. He made his living with a gun, sure—and a fast one at that—but he was no hired-out murderer.

He wasn't going to just shoot someone down, not even for a beautiful señorita like Dolores Mackenzie. Still . . . she *had* saved his neck from a Mexican misunderstanding and her Barbed M ranch had plenty of varmints it could stand to lose, such as its own rustling foreman and Dolores' conniving brother-in-law.

On the other hand, Pecos told himself, there was a difference between gunning a man down in cold blood and eliminating a two-footed rattler before it got you.

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CROSSFIRE AT BARBED M

by

TOM WEST

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CROSSFIRE AT BARBED M

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THE RAID AT CRAZYHORSE

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I

PECOS PARKER didn't have to guess where he was; one sniff and he knew. Once the stale, fetid air of a jail stings a man's nostrils the remembrance never fades.

Waking in the cold gray of a dreary dawn, sprawled on a hard-packed earth floor, he considered morosely that never before had he felt more like the frazzled end of a misspent night.

He raised upon an elbow, repressed a groan when fiery needles of pain stabbed through his skull, and gazed curiously around. A motley aggregation of red-shirted teamsters, pantalooned Mexicans and spurred punchers—all plainly the worse for wear—sprawled over the filthy floor, the majority limp in liquor-drugged slumber. With dawn, some had awakened and hunched dispiritedly, eyeing the rough adobe walls with lack-luster gaze. One sat silently spewing up his guts; from the sickly stench that hung heavy on the

stale air, he was not alone. The effluvia, reflected Pecos with disgust, was calculated to turn the stomach of a polecat. Unquestionably he was a guest in the Governor's Palace at Santa Fe—and lodged in the jail wing.

From habit, he fumbled in a vest pocket in search of papers and tobacco, to find they were missing, together with the balance of his personal possessions. Then he painfully levered to a sitting position. Pain racked his head. He fingered a thick mat of dark hair, winced when he located a lump he'd never had before, bulging on the back of his skull.

Brow creased, he tried to think back. Slowly, his numbed brain began to function and the picture to clarify. He remembered attending a fandango and taking a few snorts of that high-powered concoction well named Taos Lightning. But not enough to destroy good judgement; he was convinced of that. How else could he remember the events that followed with such clarity?

There had been music—guitars—a swarming press of dancers in the long, low-ceilinged adobe—swarthy Mexicans with sheathed knives, languorous-eyed señoritas half-veiled by filmy mantillas, a scattering of bearded bullwhackers. Everyone seemed to be invited to these Santa Fe bailes, and everyone came. He was no great shakes as a dancer, so he'd stood back against the wall and watched the swirl of couples gyrating over the floor.

At first it had all been decorous enough to suit a parson, but as the liquor—served at fancy prices in an adjoining room—began to circulate, the hilarity and noise increased.

It was then that he had focused on the girl, and she'd sure enough taken his breath away. Never before had he feasted his eyes on such a vision of curvaceous loveliness. She didn't seem to be dancing; she stood inside the street door, flanked by a tough-looking puncher on each side, absorbing the scene with dark, lustrous eyes. Her glance

wandered restlessly around. Once it had focused on him, and demurely dropped at his quick smile. He could see her now, lips parted with pleasure, white teeth flashing as she flung a remark to one of her escorts. A black silk mantilla was arranged with careless grace over her raven hair and accentuated the smooth flawlessness of her features. Beneath the filmy folds of the mantilla, the revealing white camisa affected by Spanish women failed to wholly conceal the curve of swelling breasts. A white girl tanned by the sun would be no browner, but it took Spanish blood to impart that superb carriage.

Then trouble erupted, as it had a habit of doing at these fandangoes, particularly in Sante Fe. Not more than a generation back the Territory of New Mexico had been a Mexican state. General Kearny grabbed it through powder-smoke. A year later, revolting Mexicans murdered the first American governor and wiped out every yanqui they could corner. Hangings followed, and sullen Mexican submission. But beneath the submission a latent hatred of the conquering Americano still smoldered. Given incentive, it was liable to blaze up.

A bunch of Missouri bullwhackers, well-liquored, proceeded to take over the dance floor, elbowing the Mexicans aside with casual contempt, grabbing their dark-haired partners and whirling them wildly. The chiquitas enjoyed the fun, but their discomfitted menfolk gathered in scowling, muttering knots, fingering the hafts of their knives.

The spluttering fuse reached the powder barrel when a big Missourian carelessly lifted up a Mexican who was loath to relinquish his lady, and hurled him against a wall.

Naked steel flashed in the yellow light of the oil lamps and the whole pack of outraged Mexicans lit into the turbulent bullwhackers. The music promptly cut off; women shrieked; there was a feminine stampede for the doors.

The bullwhackers bunched and joyfully met the onslaught

with swinging boots, hard fists and their own steel. Blood from slashed arms and torsos began to blotch the floor. When a brawny bullwhacker went down, ripped from brisket to bellybone, Pecos figured it was time to take a hand. He jerked his six-gun. Glass tinkled as he flung four fast slugs at an equal number of lamps bracketed on the walls. In quick succession, the lamps blinked out, plunging the room into darkness, a darkness reverberating with the thunder of the reports, deafening in the confined space.

Surprise, coupled with inability to distinguish friend from foe, chopped off the turmoil. Through the obscurity, Pecos could hear the hacking of men as the acrid powdersmoke bit into their throats. He was about to plug out his empties when something slammed down on the back of his head with the impact of a kicking mule. From then on the record was blank until he'd awakened in the filthy cárcel—his head decorated with a lump that felt as large as an ostrich egg.

Likely the law had taken a hand, he considered wryly, and the deputies had slapped everyone they could gather up into the hoosegow.

The stench grew as the light strengthened and the foul air began to warm up. Cautiously, to avoid jolting his damaged head, Pecos eased to his feet and moved toward one of the small, iron-barred windows carved in the massive adobe walls.

He reached the window and stood staring out, inhaling deeply, gratefully filling his lungs with clear air. Before him stretched the dusty vista of the Plaza, empty at this early hour except for a stray mongrel or two sniffing around. Across the Plaza rose the graceful bulk of the Church of Our Lady of Light, with its high twin towers. Close-packed on the two remaining sides of the square were dumpy, one-story adobe stores and saloons, grass sprouting from their flat roofs.

The jail, he knew, was located at one end of the Gover-

nor's Palace, a vast adobe citadel extending along the entire north side of the Plaza. It housed the custom house, barracks, public offices and the armory, but he had never figured it would house him.

Behind him men began to stir with uneasy discomfort. He hunkered below the window, stoically enduring his aching head and curbing an itching impatience to get out of the stinking hole. In his present condition, Joe Parker—more familiarly known as Pecos—was no fashion plate. Dried blood matted his dark hair with rust-like splotches and spotted his plaid shirt. His loose-knotted red bandanna was stained and faded, his corduory pants slick with grime. He had the long, rawboned form of the Plains Texan, slimmed to a whipcord wiriness. Commonly scraped smooth, his lean jaw was peppered with incipient beard. He looked young, maybe in his early twenties, and he looked tough right through. There was a quality about him, a taut alertness, a bleak challenge in the slate-gray eyes set in flat-planed features, that promised—like a porcupine—that he would likely prove prickly if handled carelessly. Among those who followed his trade he rated high. You could stake your saddle on Pecos, they claimed. When he promised, he performed.

At the far end of the room a heavy door grated open and two deputies, gunbelts buckled around their middles, stood on the threshold. The foremost, a bony-faced man with drooping mustachio, held a sheet of paper in one hand. In a monotonous chant he began reeling off names. One by one, prisoners shuffled across the floor. When six were assembled in a ragged file, the two deputies marched them out and the door rasped shut.

Pecos recognized one of the bullwhackers he had seen at the fandango. "What's the toll for drunk and disorderly?" he inquired.

"Five dollars!" returned the other, with weary disgust.

"They nick me regular. Every time I head into Santa Fe I hit this joint. Wal, they'll boot us out afore noon."

It seemed the bullwhacker had called the turn, as the two deputies steadily drained men away. But they seemed to have misplaced his name. It was long past noon and the jail was now empty except for two Mexicans in cotton pantaloons and dirty jackets. They still stretched snoring on the floor.

Again the door opened. The bony-faced jailor entered, tramped across to the two Mexicans and began to boot them into wakefulness.

Pecos moved over and braced him. "Say," he inquired, "when do I get out of this joint?"

The deputy consulted his list, looked up. "You Parker?"

"Yep."

"Guess you'll be around for quite a while."

"Charged with what?"

"The Capitán Bautista ain't decided yet. Likely it'll be murder," returned the jailer, with no interest. His boot thudded into a drowsy Mexican's ribs. "Get a wiggle on," he growled. "What you figure this is—the Ritz?"

II

PECOS STOOD UNMOVING, stiff with surprise, as the jailer herded the two shambling Mexicans to the door. Murder! And he'd been no more than an innocent spectator of a drunken ruckus. The worst he had anticipated was a charge of drunk and disorderly. At that, the charge was unjustified.

He paced the cell and considered his predicament. The

longer he mulled it over the more he became convinced that this was the worse tight he'd been in for quite a while. The population of Santa Fe was almost entirely Mexican. And there was no sidestepping the fact that most of the chili-eaters hated Americanos like the Devil hated holy water. Likely there'd been a killing at the fandango. He was a stranger, so they'd pinned the blame on him. There were plenty of Mex at that fandango, to swear that he was guilty of every crime on the calendar.

His cogitations were interrupted by the creaking of the outer door. It opened and, from the threshold, the bony-faced deputy beckoned.

Lips tight, the prisoner moved toward him and was ushered down a wide corridor, flanked by many doors. His guard threw one open and thrust him into a square, bare-furnished room. His quick, questing glance embraced smooth-plastered walls, bare except for the image of a saint. Wanted notices were strewn over a table beneath a narrow, barred window. An oak filing cabinet stood in one corner. Straight-back chairs, with seats of laced rawhide, were lined along a wall.

The prisoner's attention lingered upon a portly Mexican in colorful uniform, seated at a massive desk with carved legs in the center of the room. This would be the Capitán Bautista. Head bent, apparently engrossed in one of the many documents spread before him, the Capitán seemed unaware of his presence.

Fuming inwardly, Pecos stood inside the doorway, looking the Capitán over. He decided he didn't like what he saw. Bautista was a heavy-paunched, bull-necked lump of a man. Triple chins wobbled beneath his jaw. Small, shrewd eyes, black as jet, were buried deep in fleshy, pock-marked features, from which an acquisitive nose arced like a buzzard's beak. Thinning hair, well-greased, was carefully brushed back over his balding head.

A dark velvet jacket, with many shiny buttons down its front, snugly fitted the Capitán's beefy shoulders. Unbuttoned to accommodate the bulge of his belly, it revealed a white silk shirt. An elegant black handkerchief swathed his thick neck and a vivid scarlet sash encased his swelling middle.

The deputy pushed his prisoner forward. Bautista looked up abruptly. Then, with a frown, he leaned back in his chair, scrutinizing the man before him. His glance dropped down to the Lone Star embroidered on the uppers of the prisoner's riding boots.

"So you are this Parker?" he commented, and his thick lips pursed. "Texan, eh?"

"Raised on the Pecos River," returned the prisoner shortly.

"These Texans are always troublemakers," mused his interrogator. Then, sharply, "Your business?"

"Gunfighter."

"A gunman, too!" The Capitán's tone intimated that there could be no greater infamy.

"Gunfighter!" corrected Pecos tightly.

The Capitán's eyebrows raised. "Is there a difference?"

"Sure," snapped the prisoner. "A gunman's a killer, an hombre who'd beef a man out of devilment. A gunfighter hires out his gun—gunfighting's his trade. He don't jest kill for kicks."

"So one kills for pleasure, the other for dinero," murmured Bautista. "Birds of a feather!" His voice raised, "You are a hired killer!"

Pecos shrugged. It didn't sound so good, but why argue?

"And who hired you to kill a man at the fandango in the casa of Juan Hernandez?"

"I killed no one," bit back the prisoner.

"Four expended shells were found in your gun," explained the Capitán smoothly. "Drunken Americanos incited

a riot in which two men were slain, one by a knife thrust, another by a bullet. I am afraid, my friend, that a jury would not be simpatico." He switched to a new angle, "What brought you to Sante Fe?"

"Jest got through with a job in Aconno County."

"Killing?" inquired Bautista blandly.

"Gunhand!" returned the prisoner, his tone curt. "The Del Norte Cattle Company was battling a slew of ranchers over water rights. Both sides signed up every gun in sight. After we'd slugged it out I figured I'd earned a layoff and hit for Santa Fe." Tightly, he added, "I sure was loco."

"So you deny firing four shots in the fandango?"

"Nope. I shot out the lights to stop a ruckus. Four lights —four shells."

"An ingenious explanation," smiled Bautista. "One I would find hard to believe except for the testimony of a witness."

Pecos stared with startled surprise. A witness! The bullwhackers had too much trouble on their hands to pay attention and it was a sure thing that no Mex would step forward to clear him.

The Capitán's voice raised. "Bring in the Señorita Dolores Mackenzie."

Pecos swung around, eyeing the open doorway as the deputy stepped outside. Who in creation was this unknown benefactor? His jaw slackened with surprise and the Capitán heaved to his feet to bow as low as his big belly would permit when the raven-haired beauty Pecos had glimpsed at the fandango swept in.

The deputy hastily set a chair for the lady beside the desk. She sank lightly upon the seat, eyeing Bautista composedly. The girl was garbed wholly in black now. Her camisa was made of dark silk and ornamented with many ruffles, but the skirt—short, as all Spanish women wore them—gave a revealing glimpse of slim calves. A mantilla was draped over the glossy tresses of her hair and drawn

across her face so that only her eyes, deep pools of provocation, were visible.

"You were at the fandango, señorita?" prompted Bautista.

"I was," she returned, and her soft tones were like soothing balm to the prisoner. "It was a fearsome experience." She shuddered. "The flashing knives, the roaring gun, the cursing men! It will forever haunt my dreams."

"And what part did this man play?"

Her gaze transferred to the prisoner, weighing him impersonally. "I think he sought to restore order, by shooting out the lights." Her voice quickened with enthusiasm. "There were four lamps—he did not miss once." Pecos had never heard more flawless English.

"Which would account for the four expended shells," purred the Capitán. The portly Bautista seemed all affability now. "If I should release him to your custody, you will be responsible for his good conduct?" he questioned.

"Certainly!" she returned. Her cheeks curved in a smile, "He will attend no more fandangoes."

"That will not displease me," commented Bautista. He nodded at the deputy who promptly opened a closet door, revealing shelves overladen with confiscated revolvers and rifles. Lifting out the prisoner's gunbelt, his Stetson, and a bulky envelope, the deputy dumped the armful on the desk.

The Capitán reached, slid Pecos' six-gun out of its flared holster and handed it to the girl. "You will not return this to the prisoner until he leaves Santa Fe," he directed. Then to Pecos, "You are discharged. The Señorita Mackenzie will be responsible for your actions as long as you remain in Santa Fe." An ironic note entered his voice, "You are indeed fortunate, señor, that the señorita has such excellent powers of observation."

Masking his surprise at this abrupt change in his fortunes, Pecos reached for his gunbelt, buckled it on and

thonged down the toe of the holster. Then he broke open the envelope. Wallet, jackknife, smoking materials, a stream of gold eagles spilled out. He stowed his belongings in various pockets and grabbed the Stetson.

The girl came to her feet and, with a negligent nod in Bautista's direction, moved with regal grace toward the door. Pecos tailed her uncertainly, wondering if all this would not prove to be some devious Spanish trick. It seemed too pat to be true—a murder charge one minute; freedom the next.

But nothing further developed as the girl swept down the corridor outside, turned through an open doorway, stepped out from beneath the wide gallery that fronted the entire length of the Governor's Palace and began to cross the Plaza, apparently oblivious of his presence.

Around them surged the bustling life of Santa Fe—white-chemised women smoking the eternal cigarritos, their brown faces red-daubed as decreed by fashion; Mexican gallants with slashed pantaloons and huge sombreros; soberly-clad traders; ragged peons; yelling fruit vendors. All were half-veiled by the ever-rising dust stirred up by lumbering wagons and prancing horsemen.

At the Señorita Mackenzie's tapping heels loped the released prisoner, brow furrowed. Even now he couldn't convince himself that this sudden release made good sense. He stepped up beside the girl. "Say," he demanded, "ain't you scairt you'll lose me?"

She looked up to meet his frowning gaze and amusement danced deep in her dark eyes. "No," she said. "I have your gun."

"I sure thank you for aceing me outa that tight. What I can't figure is why that fat hog would release me on your say-so."

"Gold opens all doors, save those of Heaven," she replied demurely.

"So you bribed that doggoned politico!" Pecos shook his head in perplexity. "Why? I'm a stranger. What's it to you whether or not I rot in jail?"

"I wished to place you under an obligation, Señor Gunfighter," she told him placidly. "Now, to discharge that obligation, you will do me a favor."

"Jest what kind of a favor?" he inquired doubtfully.

She shrugged. "It is nothing. Kill a man."

III

PECOS DROPPED a startled oath. "You mean, ma'am, beef some gent—to please you?

"It is your trade," she replied indifferently.

He swallowed. It just didn't seem possible that this lovely girl, with eyes soft as a fawn's, could discuss murder so casually. And she sure had Pecos Parker figured wrong. He swung in front of her, blocking her path and bringing her to a stop.

"See here, ma'am," he said curtly, "I'm no killer, not the kind you got in mind. You hire another gun to handle this bushwhacking chore."

Looking down into her dark eyes, he read blank astonishment. "They tell me you are a killer," she protested, "that you hire out your gun to whoever may have the price. I have the price!"

He cursed beneath his breath. Just what did she think he was, some skulking renegade, a lousy border rat?

"Sure I fight, ma'am, but I fight fair," he explained patiently. "And I've got no use for females, howsoever handsome, who plan murder."

"Murder!" she echoed, and her lips quirked. "You speak in riddles, señor." Quickly sobering, she added haughtily, "I will not wrangle like a charro in the market place. It is better that we talk in the casa."

With that, she slipped around him and continued across the Plaza, threading through the laughing, yammering throng with lofty disdain. Like a lean shadow, Pecos dogged her.

In the shade of the twin-towered church, the girl turned off into a quiet street where solid brown adobe homes of the better class drowsed behind walled patios. He followed her through the arched entrance of one, into a bricked courtyard. Several ponies were tied to rings in the rough walls, their saddlery heaped in a corner. The two punchers he had seen at the fandango hunkered near the ponies, chewing quirlies.

Crossing the courtyard, the señorita passed through the wide doorway of a square-fronted adobe.

Trailing, Pecos found himself in a spacious living room, the ceiling supported by great squared vigas. It was cool and dim after the sunglare outside. The smooth walls were tinted white, covered with flowery-patterned paper to shoulder height and ornamented with vividly colored religious paintings. The plaster cast of a saint stood in a niche and a succession of sofas were arranged around the walls. Matting covered the floor and ornate wooden latticework the glassless windows.

His guide sank onto a sofa, motioned him to sit beside her, and clapped her hands. A Mexican girl, the red skirt of a peasant brushing her bare legs, appeared at one of several rear doorways.

"Vino!" called the señorita, in a tone which told she was accustomed to service.

Moving silently in soft zapatos, the girl brought a flask containing an amber fluid, and two glasses on a tray, placed them on a small table and withdrew.

Pecos watched his hostess pour. She handed him a full glass. He was not a wine drinker, bourbon was his choice. He sipped dubiously, but emptied the glass. The vino was tart, but mighty refreshing. From habit, he rolled a cigarette, wondering what was next to come.

The girl merely tasted her wine and set the glass aside.

"This casa we use when in town," she volunteered abruptly. "My father owns a cattle ranch, the Barbed M, it lies to the south. He is an Englishman." She smiled. "A stubborn Englishman, he has always insisted that only English be spoken in the house. Now he lies helpless, in agony, a bullet in his spine—the work of a picaro, a rustler. My mother was Spanish, she is with the Saints. My brother Jack died on the Arkansas River. So I am alone, except for my sister Juanita. Juanita married a sheepman." her tone changed to contempt. "His name is Guttman. He is a pig."

"Who runs the ranch?" inquired Pecos, for want of something better to say.

The girl laughed shortly. "I do not, although I try." Then her tone raised and words tumbled from her lips, "We face nothing but ruin. Desperation drove me to Santa Fe, to hunt a man who will save us. I saw you at the baile and I knew I had found the man."

The Texan scrutinized her with puzzled eyes. "First you talk of a killing, now it's running a ranch. You kinda got me tangled, ma'am."

"It is this ladrón Leroux," she threw back. "He must be killed."

"I jest ain't interested," he told her forcefully.

"Very well, señor," she returned calmly. "I will return you

to the cárcel. The Capitán will understand that I was mistaken, you shot at more than the lights."

Pecos chewed his smoke, slate-gray eyes imperturbably meeting the señorita's challenging stare. She'd likely do just what she threatened, he reflected. Not that he had any intention of returning to the stinking jail.

His gun bulged the girl's handbag, set on the sofa between them. In two shakes he could grab that gun, duck outside and hightail for the livery where he'd stabled his dun. In the maze of Santa Fe's narrow streets, radiating like the spokes of a wheel from the Plaza, he could dodge Bautista and his deputies. He glanced beyond the girl, who was poised straightbacked and watching him with intent eyes, and gauged the shadows through a latticed window. In two hours, he figured, the sun would set. Darkness would triple his chance of making a getaway. He'd string this chiquita along for awhile, play for time.

"Maybe we should chew this over a mite," he drawled.

The señorita smiled, triumph in her eyes. "Now you are talking like a sensible man," she approved. "Who would rot in a filthy prison when he can gain much honor and dinero by saving a helpless girl from the loss of all she has, all her good father strove so hard to gather?" She sighed. "Before my father was crippled we owned many cows, they were as locusts in the valley. Now so few remain."

"Rustling?"

"Treachery!" she retorted vehemently. "Manuel Leroux was my father's segundo. Now that mestizo has promoted himself to caporal. He runs the ranch, hires, fires—and steals." Her voice deepened with passion. "When I protest, this ladrón laughs. Men fear his gun and his knife. He has rid himself of many faithful hands who served my father, replaced them with men who follow only him. They loot, they rob." She spread small hands. "I'm helpless."

"Fire the hairpin!"

"Have I not tried? He treats it as one big joke. I suspect he is in cahoots—as you would say—with this sheepman, Carl Guttman, my accursed brother-in-law. Between them, they plan to reduce us to beggary."

So that was why she needed a fast gun, mused Pecos. She craved to bring this Leroux into line. Odds were, most of the trouble was in her own mind. A high-spirited girl, likely spoiled rotten by her paw, she hated to be curbed by the foreman. If Leroux had formerly been the Old Man's segundo he likely knew his business. But she craved him "out" and had cooked up this scheme to hire a fast gun and send him packing. As for losses, how would she know how many steers she was short without a round-up? He'd keep her talking, then hightail when the time was ripe. He asked, "You tallied the stock?"

"I need no tally!" she asserted forcefully. "Shortly, the riders will comb the range for the spring round-up. That will prove the truth of my words." Passionately, she added, "Leroux thinks me a foolish girl, weak as one of Carl's lambs. I will show him!" Then she shrugged, and refilled his glass, "You think I talk too much?"

"Guess you're kinda upset," he replied guardedly, and again emptied the glass. This vino slid down easily, but it had a mighty mellowing effect.

"So you figure this Leroux hombre would fight?" he asked, making talk to kill time.

"He is the very devil, a smiling devil. And he is death with the gun."

Pecos thoughtfully built another cigarette. Could be, he cogitated, he'd been a mite hasty in deciding to pull out. Maybe the girl was telling a straight story. It might be worth looking into. The round-up would reveal how much truth there was to her claim. He was in her debt, for she'd

sure aced him out of a tight. The least he could do would be to take a look-see.

"Wal," he mused, "I never yet sidestepped a showdown. What say I mosey out to your Barbed M and kinda size things up?"

"Bueno!" she cried, eyes shining. "Your pay will be $250 a month. You wish some dinero now?" Eagerly, she reached for her handbag.

"Nope!" He smiled at her animation. "I ain't had a chance to liquidate my gatherings on the last job yet, but I sure feel plumb naked without that gun."

She laughed, opened the bag, brought out his triggerless .44. He reached for the gun, flicked open the loading gate and swung out the cylinder, found it empty.

He slipped five shells from his gunbelt into the chambers. When he'd holstered the gun, he inquired briskly, "When do we ride?"

"Tomorrow, at dawn. There will be two riders with us; I brought them as escort." Her voice tightened, "Two I can trust."

Pecos came to his feet and his lips twisted with a slow smile, "How do you know I won't light a chuck afore sun-up, ma'am?"

"I trust you!" she said simply, and held out a small hand. "Adios, until tomorrow."

Both turned at the sound of a dry cough. A squat, blocky-built man had stepped through a rear doorway. His rugged features were square and thrusting, jutting jaw rock-hard. The hardness ran to his eyes, a startling blue, opaque as bottle glass. From his close-cropped blond hair through which the skull showed brown, to the set of his heavy shoulders, he reflected domineering arrogance. His garb radiated quality—a well-cut broadcloth suit, heavy gold chain looped across his vest, a white linen shirt, silk cravat.

"I did not know you were in town," said the girl, her

tone frigid. She turned to Pecos. "This is my brother-in-law, the sheepherder." The last two words came out with biting emphasis.

The Texan masked his surprise. Offhand he would have set the stranger down as a banker, the type of banker accustomed to foreclosing mortgage loans without blinking.

The thickset man smiled with his lips, attention focused upon Pecos. The cold blue eyes took in the Texan's thonged-down gun, raised inquiringly to the lean features.

"I have hired this man to help around the ranch, Carl," put in the girl coldly.

"What for?" he rasped. "Shoot jackrabbits?"

"Nope," put in Pecos. "Skunks."

Guttman ignored the remark and swung to face his sister-in-law. "Another of your foolish notions?" he demanded.

"Why is it so foolish?" she flashed back.

Pecos turned to leave. It was plain that there was plenty of friction between these two and he wanted out. Before he reached the door, he heard heavy footsteps approaching from behind. At the door he turned to face Guttman.

The sheepman extended a horny hand. "No hard feelings, mister," he grated, "but that gal gets the damndest notions."

The Texan shrugged and casually grasped the extended hand, felt the pressure of paper against his palm. At his quick, inquiring glance, Guttman dropped an eyelid.

Pecos said nothing. Outside, he examined the slip of paper that had been left in his palm. It carried a single sentence, the words neatly lettered, "Meet me at the Cantina Angelico—8 P.M."

IV

Drifting tobacco smoke clouded the Cantina Angelico and the low-ceiling saloon throbbed with the exuberance of its patrons when Pecos stepped through the doorway close upon eight o'clock that evening. A broad-fronted adobe, set on a narrow side street off the Plaza, the cantina was packed with a swarthy throng of townsmen, arrieros and vaqueros, clustered around small tables that dotted the earthen floor. Through the drone of their talk sifted the plaintive melody of a guitar, strummed by a wrinkled oldster. Wrapped in a ragged serape, he drifted from table to table.

Stopping inside the doorway, Pecos searched the interior for sight of Carl Guttman, but the blocky sheepman didn't seem to be among those present.

He elbowed a path to the bar, bought a bottle of beer and dropped down at a side table. There was no friendliness in the glances that followed him. It was comforting to feel a wall at his back.

He scarcely had time to fashion a smoke when Guttman hurtled in. There was none of the leisurely ease that marked the gait of the typical New Mexican about the sheepman. His short, thick legs impelled his stocky form practically at a trot. The heavyset jaw was thrust forward and the general impression was that of a man who knew just where he was going and intended to lose no time getting there.

He stopped in the center of the cantina, pivoted, frowning around, focused on Pecos and descended upon him.

"Buy you a drink?" drawled the Texan, when Guttman plunked down on a chair across the table.

"Nope!" barked the other. "All I stomach is lager—import

my own." His chilly eyes dwelt on Pecos, "What fool play is Dolores dreaming up now—hiring a gunman?"

"You named it," smiled the Texan. "She needs a gent to shoot jackrabbits." He didn't like the sheepman's manner, in fact he couldn't name one thing he did like about Guttman.

The blocky man brought out a cigar, bit off the end with a snap of his strong white teeth, lit the smoke and puffed, his frowning gaze never leaving Pecos' lean features.

"So you figure it's none of my business," he grunted. "Maybe I should make the reason for my interest plain. First, I'm Dolores' only male relative, outside her father; second, I've got a $25,000 stake in that ranch. I loaned Mackenzie $25,000 to help him get started, and I intend to protect my interest. Mackenzie's as helpless as a hamstrung horse. Leroux took over on my advice. He's doing a good job, but the girl . . ." He raised his broad shoulders. "She never quits squawking. She craves a free hand." He snorted. "An inexperienced girl—a free hand! Now do you figure it's none of my business?" he challenged belligerently.

"Nope," admitted Pecos. *This sure put things in a new light*, he thought. Aloud, he commented, "The gal's got a notion Leroux is running the spread down. Spoke of losing plenty stock."

"She'd lose more without him," snapped Guttman. "Sure the Barbed M is plagued by rustlers. You're organized in Texas, you've got the Rangers. Here every man fights to hold his own. I'd say Leroux has had a real tough job holding losses down." Irately, he added, "My guess is that Dolores, the spoiled brat, has pitched you a string of windies. She's got her knife out for Leroux. If you figure to gun him on her say-so, you're loco. And I'd be the first to sic the law onto you."

"You figure she hired me to beef Leroux?"

"What else could I figure?"

The Texan chewed his cigarette, cogitating. It seemed

that he had been fooled by a pretty face. A willful girl was using him to vent her spite on a man who was doing his durndest to salvage her father's ranch. Guttman was convincing. No man with a $25,000 stake in a spread would stand by and see the place ruined.

"So this is a sucker play, and I'm it?" he said wryly.

Guttman had apparently expected argument or outright opposition. For the first time his square features creased with geniality. "You named it!" His tone held amusement. "But why quit? If you buck she'll hire another gun. Play along awhile." He dipped into a pocket, brought out a fat roll of greenbacks, peeled off five, one by one, dropping them on the stained tabletop.

"Stick that hundred in your jeans," he invited. "There'll be another hundred every month—just as long as you keep cases on Dolores and report to me."

Pecos looked over the five crumpled twenty-dollar greenbacks lying before him. Then his slaty eyes, expressionless, lifted to meet Guttman's.

"So the price is $100 a month—to sell out Dolores Mackenzie?" His tone brittled. "Hell, Guttman, if you weren't a lousy sheepman you could read the earmarks of a scrub. I'm no scrub, and no double-crossing son of a bitch. You know what I think of your dinero?" He picked up one greenback, held the glowing tip of his cigarette against the lower edge until flame crept up. Guttman, stiff in his seat, watched.

Pecos dropped the blackened greenback, half-charred and still burning, onto the table, reached for another.

With a snarl, the sheepman swept the four remaining notes out of his reach, hastily gathered them together and stuffed them into a pocket.

"Buck me, you two-bit gunman," he promised, his tone thick with rage, "and I'll cut you down to size!"

"Any time," drawled Pecos, with disinterest.

Lips tight, the squat sheepman scraped back his chair and jerked to his feet. "I'm not through with you—yet!" he promised harshly, pivoted and stomped, stiff-legged, out of the cantina.

Pecos' gaze followed the short, powerful form until it disappeared from view. He'd been most convinced by Guttman, he pondered, until the hombre had tried to buy him. Now he was beginning to suspect that there was more to all this than met the eye. Could be the sheepman's only interest in the Barbed M was the safety of his $25,000, and could be Dolores was as rattle-brained as Guttman claimed. Time would tell. This job gave promise of becoming mighty interesting.

With nothing better to do than kill time, the Texan made another smoke and slacked in his seat, his gaze drifting over the crowded cantina. Every now and then, he noticed, dark faces appeared at the square openings cut in the front wall that served as windows, as passersby glanced in. Their features were framed for a moment, then they passed on. Like every other building in Santa Fe, the Cantina Angelico's windows were open spaces. Window glass was a rarity, practically unknown in New Mexico.

At first, the idling Texan paid the windows little attention. Then, suddenly, he quickened at the realization that the same face had appeared several times and that the object of its attention was himself. When a man lives by gun-speed, unceasing vigilance is the price he pays for survival, and he is apt to develop a premonition of impending danger akin to that of a wild animal.

Alert now, Pecos watched the windows. Within seconds a Mexican's swarthy features dabbed into view. The Texan met his intent stare. Instantly the stranger averted his eyes and slid out of view.

Convinced now that one or more Mexicans were keeping cases on him, Pecos gave thought to the best means of

eluding them. He wanted no trouble in the cantina. Amid the crowd, it was too easy for an assassin to slip a knife between his ribs. Casually, to avoid raising the suspicion of his unknown shadows, he searched for another exit. There appeared to be one, beyond a closed door at the far end of the bar that likely led to a storeroom. A storeroom, he reflected, usually had access to the outside.

In no haste, he rose, eased across the packed floor and bought another bottle at the bar. Bottle in hand, he slid between knots of jabbering patrons, working toward the storeroom door. When he finally stood in front of it, he casually raised the bottle to his lips, tilted it and watched the barkeep. The moment that worthy's attention was diverted elsewhere, the Texan grabbed the knob of the door handle, turned, and pulled. The door came open. In a flash he stepped over the threshold, closed the door behind him and stood in pitch darkness, the muted drone of voices from the cantina in his ears.

He set the bottle on the earth floor, struck a stinker. The faint flame revealed stacked cases, bottle-lined shelves and, beyond, a bolted door.

The match died. Inching forward in the darkness, he came up against the door, fingered and found the bolt, eased it back. The door rasped open on gritty hinges.

Cautiously, gun latched in his right hand, he eased through the doorway and found himself in a narrow alley that ran the length of the cantina. Nothing moved in the gloom. Overhead, the sky was peppered with bright stars. Then, as he carefully closed the storeroom door behind him, one, two, three dark forms erupted into the mouth of the alley from the street, racing toward him. Starlight reflected white upon drawn knives.

For an instant the Texan hesitated, debating whether to duck back into the storeroom, or make a break for the rear end of the alley. Inside, he decided, he would be

trapped; his chances were better in the narrow alley. His assailants could only get at him one at a time.

At a run, he hit for the rear, dodged around the angle of the building and stood, gun in hand, tensed and waiting.

Quickly, the shuffle of fast-moving feet and the labored breathing of hurrying men reached his ears. A sombreroed form emerged from the alley, a broad-bladed knife clutched in his right hand. Viciously, the steel barrel of Pecos' six-gun chopped down, taking the hard-breathing Mexican above the right ear. He dropped like a pole-axed steer.

Pressing at his heels, another tripped over the prone form, stumbled. Pecos' swinging boot, sharp-toed, took him in the crotch. With an agonized gasp, he, too, went down, balled up, writhing spasmodically.

The Texan stepped out, gun leveled. The third Mexican was in full flight, a fleeting shadow in the darkened alley.

Twice the gun roared. With the second shot a shriek ripped the air like the thrust of a jagged knife. Pecos heard the thud of a falling body. Dropping the gun back into leather, he slid along the rear wall of the cantina, passed another alley, ducked into the next. Feeling his way down the narrow canyon of darkness, he stepped out into the street and turned back in the direction of the cantina. Shadowy in the night, men were bunched around the mouth of the alley on its far side, yammering and gesticulating. Casually, he sauntered past them, rolling a smoke. But for Lady Luck, he reflected, he would now be buzzard bait, a knife in his guts. Who had sicced that gang of greasers onto him? Maybe it was an offshoot of the ruckus at the fandango the previous night, or maybe those knife-wielders had been hired by Carl Guttman. If it was Guttman there must be something mighty rotten out at the Barbed M.

V

At dawn, Pecos rode into the Plaza. The new day, still no more than a promise in the east, stained the horizon pale red. The sprawl of sunbaked adobes that was boisterous, buoyant Santa Fe still slept. A row of traders' wagons, teamless, bulked dimly across one end of the Plaza. Beyond them squatted the old Governor's Palace, barred windows of the jail wing staring like dead eyes. A day before he'd been on the inside looking out; a fellow never knew what cards Lady Luck would deal.

His head pivoted at the clatter of hooves. He saw Dolores Mackenzie, vague in the gray light of dawn, muffled by a long cloak, approaching across the square. She rode sidesaddle, her mount a clean-limber buckskin. The pony had speed and stamina. Behind the girl trailed two grizzled vaqueros, dark-featured, hawk-nosed men, huge spurs projecting from the rear of their riding boots. Conchas strung around the rims of their huge sombreros tinkled softly.

Pecos raised a hand in greeting. The girl nodded shortly, wheeled away and raised her pony to a trot. With no sound beyond the musical jingle of the dangling conchas and the muted thud of their ponies' hooves they passed through the dark shadow of the church, heading southward.

The adobes of Santa Fe quickly faded behind them. They followed the curves of a wagon road, snaking across a plain patched with straggly corn fields and veined by acequias—irrigation ditches—that brought life to the land.

Strengthening light revealed clusters of mud huts specked

over the rolling terrain: goats browsing on sparce brush, an occasional flock of sheep, its herder—shapeless beneath flowing serape—propped motionless on his staff.

The chill of dawn evaporated. The sun crept higher; heat began to build up. Eastward, the Sangre de Cristo mountains bulked black, and to the west the rising sun laid a golden sheen on the flanks of the Jemez range.

Pecos pulled up beside the girl. "Say," he said, "I ran up against Guttman last night."

"That accursed sheepherder!" Her voice held prickly disdain.

"He claims he's got a $25,000 stake in the Barbed M."

She laughed shortly. "You think he would let me forget it? It is strange, that loan."

"Yeah?"

"He swears that he advanced the dinero to my father twenty years ago, to buy land for the ranch. Yet there was never a whisper of the loan until Father lay near death."

"Maybe they kept it quiet, between them."

Her smile was scornful. "Carl keep a debt quiet! He would have shouted it to the heavens. Gold is his god—gold, and power. Why was he content to remain silent for twenty years and now, rapacious as a wolf, yell pay—pay—pay?"

"What does your paw say?"

"There was no loan."

"That cinches it!"

"Except," she returned slowly, "Carl has a note. I think he forged it, but I have no proof." She spat. "That sheepherder stinks worse than his sheep."

Gradually the terrain changed as they steadily jogged southward. Jackals, cultivated patches, goatherders, had long vanished. They headed into a vast and lonely land, flanked by misty ranges and rolling into purple infinity.

At mid-afternoon, as the little cavalcade crept across

the flats, enveloped in a nimbus of prickly dust, the girl broke a long silence, "The Solano Hills!" She raised an arm, pointing to a spread of ugly, seared-looking hills ahead, silhouetted against the skyline. "Beyond them we are home," she told the Texan.

The smooth swales broke up and the ponies wound through harsh, upended terrain, heat-hardened and wind-scoured. Beating upward, the animals dropped to a walk, following the tracks of an old wagon road through spiny hills. Finally, the nodding ponies breasted a hogback, emerged onto a bouldery bench. The girl, leading, drew rein. Pecos dismounted, rocked his saddle and made a smoke, then stood eyeing the country ahead. Almost at his feet a great shallow bowl lay outspread. On either side of it waves of unlovely hills swept down in flowing curves. Ahead, far off, ranges appeared to float like blue clouds through the haze of distance.

He turned as the girl spoke. "The Barbed M!" she exclaimed, a note of pride in her voice. Following the direction of her pointing finger, the Texan saw a ranchero, set almost in the center of the bowl. Although dwarfed by distance, its buildings were plain through the clear air. The ranchhouse resembled nothing so much as a yellow-gray fort, square and squat, a patio in its center, out of which thrust the spidery structure of a windmill, topped by slow-moving blades. Other adobe buildings were lumped around, which he mentally classified as bunkhouse, blacksmith shop, stable. A huge corral was enclosed by thick adobe walls. This was sure no shirttail outfit, he reflected, but it looked ugly, ugly as sin, blotched on the floor of the valley. Aloud, he commented, "Kinda reminds me of a fort."

"It is a fort," she threw back. "When my father built the Barbed M, Apaches and Navajos swept through Poroso Valley. They came like the whirlwind, driving off our stock. The vaqueros herded what cattle they could into the corral

and repelled the raiders from behind its walls." Her tone deepened with feeling. "My father fought to hold it against yelling savages, I fight to hold it against raging wolves." She raised her reins. The four riders strung out, following a narrow trail down a long bouldery slope.

The sun was sinking in scarlet glory when the dust-powdered little band pulled rein in the yard of the Barbed M. Pecos' swift survey encompassed a row of swarthy vaqueros, hunkered along the base of a long adobe bunkhouse. They reminded him of brooding buzzards as they squatted, broad sombreros shading their dark features, puffing cigarittos, stolidly eyeing the newcomers. Other vaqueros wandered in and out of the bunkhouse. Across the further end of the yard the adobe wall of the corral made a massive barrier, a water trough set against it.

"Say," he queried, "all your hands Mex?"

The girl shrugged. "They are now. Leroux has no use for gringos, as he calls them. Once we had many Americano riders; now, not one."

Grayed with trail dust, she slipped out of the saddle and stood ruefully easing cramped limbs. Pecos stepped down and jerked out the makings while the girl addressed the two vaqueros who had formed her escort in sibilent Spanish. One removed the Texan's bedroll from behind the cantle, lifted off his saddlebags, and jingled into the house. The other gathered up the dangling reins of the animals and led them toward the water trough.

"Say," put in Pecos. "I got a habit of spreading my soogans in the bunkhouse."

"Here you will sleep in the house," returned Dolores in a tone that brooked no denial. "We have many rooms. Come!"

He followed her across a wide gallery and through a doorway. The interior of the Mackenzie home was far more attractive than its exterior, he decided, loping behind the girl as she crossed a spacious living room. The furnishings

reflected comfort, solid comfort, and affluence. Colorful Navajo blankets draped the adobe walls. A huge rock fireplace bulked at one end and rugs were strewn over the smooth-packed earth floor. A varnished table stood in the center and leather-upholstered rockers were set around. Framed prints of hunting scenes and brass lamps set in ornamental brackets on the walls added a tasteful touch.

Without pausing, the girl passed through an arched doorway, tip-tapped along a stone-paved corridor. The far side of the corridor was pierced by many large square apertures through which Pecos glimpsed the patio, aflame with a riot of color from plantings of scarlet cacti, waxen-white yucca, white-plumed Spanish bayonet and other desert growth.

Closed doors spaced the near wall. Dolores threw one open and gestured. Pecos stepped inside, looked around with approval. The room was simply but richly furnished. Bed, bureau, washstand, and two chairs were all made from some dark wood, polished to a glimmering luster. Closely woven matting covered the floor. His spooled bedroll and saddlebags lay on the white counterpane of the bed.

"It pleases you?" inquired the girl, from the doorway.

"Never had better," he assured her.

"You wish to see my father?"

He nodded.

Again he paced behind her as she moved further down the corridor. A door stood ajar. She eased it open and quietly slipped inside, Pecos at her heels.

Slit windows, heavily draped, allowed little light to filter into the room. A large bed was dimly visible, with brass corner posts. Beneath the coverings bulged the form of a man. A big man, with pugnacity still stamped upon features from which the sun-bronze had not yet faded. But the face, once rugged, was shrunken, the eyes deep-sunk, lines of pain etched around the haggard mouth.

The cowman lay on his back, unmoving except for the slight rise and fall of his chest. His arms lay slack on the bedspread. Pecos noted the rope-wealed palms, the big, knobby knuckles. Eyes closed, the invalid gave no sign that he was aware of their presence.

The girl stepped to the bedside, leaned forward and gently kissed the lined forehead.

She straightened, turned to the Texan. "He is drugged to kill the pain," she whispered. "The medico says he can do no more."

Then Pecos became aware that an old woman stood silently by the wall beyond the bed. A spiderweb of wrinkles crossed her shriveled features, graying hair hung in a thick plait down her back. She wore the loose camisa and coarse cloth skirt of the peasant.

"He is no better, Maria?" inquired the girl.

"No, señorita," replied the woman. She crossed herself. "As always, he lies like one who is dead."

They spoke in Spanish.

Pecos caught the gleam of tears in Dolores' eyes. She turned quickly, moved toward the door.

"Jest one bullet!" he commented outside.

"One was enough," she returned, a huskiness in her voice. "It shattered his spine and lodged below the heart. The medico holds no hope whatever. He may live—helpless—for years."

"I'd say he's better dead."

"He is not your father," she retorted, with quiet reproof.

Then he saw her stiffen, gazing past him. "Leroux—that rattlesnake!" she breathed. "Is there no end to his insolence?"

She brushed past him, eyes stormy now.

Wondering at this sudden change of mood, the Texan tagged after her. Through an open door at the end of the corridor, he glimpsed movement.

The girl rushed into what was apparently an office. Over

her shoulder, Pecos focused a small steel safe in one corner, a cabinet in another, a stock calendar on the wall. Beneath a slit window stood a rolltop desk. Seated at the desk, in a swivel chair, was a rider, resplendently arrayed. When the girl burst in, he jerked around, startled.

So this was Manuel Leroux, reflected the Texan, and not a mite like the weathered old caporal he'd pictured, seasoned by long years of faithful service. The stranger was young, scarcely into his thirties, lean of body and handsome of face. His features, no darker than those of any sun-blasted Americano, were smooth-shaven, except for a dab of moustache. The thin smile that wreathed them at sight of Dolores' indignant entry was belied by the cold ruthlessness reflected in his eyes.

A short-waisted velvet jacket clothed his spare form and tight-fitting dark pants clung to his shapely legs. His boots were embroidered with silver thread and mounted with silver spurs, the rowels as large as dollar pieces. A scarlet sash banded his waist and from a wide, silver-studded gunbelt hung a workmanlike .45 with plain rubber grips in a fancy holster. A bone-handled knife was sheathed in a beaded buckskin case. The mixed-blood, considered Pecos, had a yen for silver, except for his fighting tools.

"How dare you use this office?" demanded the girl. She pushed past Leroux, gathered up several books of account that lay on the desk before him, dropped them into a drawer of the cabinet and slammed it shut.

The mestizo's dark eyes glittered, but he held his smile and came jauntily to his feet.

"This is the ranch office, señorita," he said smoothly. "I am caporal. I wished to inform myself of our financial position."

"So you waited until my back was turned and sneaked in, knowing well that Maria would not interfere."

"The señorita's temper overrides her discretion," he re-

torted, unabashed. Then his attention transferred to the Texan's dusty form. "What is this?" His smooth brow creased with apparent perplexity. "A gringo vaquero?"

"Nope," threw back Pecos, eyes expressionless. "A scalp hunter. Your's feel kinda loose?"

Leroux met his cool stare unblinking, then his eyes dropped to the thonged-down .44. "So!" he said softly. "You live by the gun."

The Texan shrugged.

"And something tells me," continued the mestizo, with cold venom, "you weel not live long." With that, he reached for a black, steeple-topped sombrero lying on a chair, shouldered contemptuously past his two visitors and strode, spur chains jingling, down the corridor.

"You know, ma'am," said the Texan thoughtfully, as the sound of the caporal's progress died on their ears, "I reckon you got that Leroux hombre dead to rights. The gent's sure begging to be cut down to size."

VI

WELL-FILLED AND well content, Pecos stepped out upon the gallery of the ranchero. Cleaned up, a hearty supper beneath his belt, he felt in a benign mood. He stood in the darkness, chewing a cigarette, enjoying a cooling breeze that soughed down the valley.

Across the yard, narrow shafts of yellow lamplight speared through the split windows of the bunkhouse. The drone of

men's voices flowed to his ears, interspersed with laughter and the lilting music of a guitar. Mexicans, he mused, were a happy race. As a nation, their history was a bloody record of invasion, oppression, revolution. Dictators had enslaved them, Americanos had grabbed chunks of their territory; the redskins never quit slaughtering them. But yet they were always ready for laughter.

Now and then, men, vaguely shadowed, drifted in and out of the bunkhouse, their cigarittos red sparks against the night. One shadow moved across the yard toward him. As it drew close, he challenged sharply, "Quien es?"

"A friend!" At sound of Manuel Leroux's voice the Texan tautened with stiff alertness.

"Yeah!" he bit back. "Wal, stay right there, Leroux. My trigger finger's itchy." He had no hankering for the feel of a knife slipped between his ribs.

A blur in the starlight, the caporal stopped a few paces distant. "Señor." His tone was eloquent with pleading. "You misjudge me. For years I work hard for the Barbed M. I devote myself to the lamented Señor Mackenzie, but the Señorita Dolores gives me no thanks, no trust. I have a queek temper, yes, but I serve faithfully."

"There could be two opinions about that."

"Do not be swayed by a girl's spite," begged Leroux. "Give me—what you call it?—the breaks."

"Sure!" agreed Pecos cautiously.

"That es all I ask," returned the mestizo gratefully. He turned to go, but paused at a thought, "Your pony, he seems to be lame, hees front off forefoot. He pick up a rock, maybe."

"Lame!" repeated the Texan quickly. "The dun seemed in good shape to me. Where'll I find him?"

"In the barn, weeth the others." Leroux raised an arm, indicated the square doorway of the horse barn, faintly illumined by an inside lamp.

"Maybe I should give the critter a once-over," decided Pecos.

"It would be wise, señor," returned the caporal courteously.

Could be, considered the Texan, eyeing the mestizo's lean form as he jingled back to the bunkhouse, he'd misjudged Leroux. The hairpin seemed friendly enough now. As for his outburst in the office, Mexican blood was always hot.

In no haste, he angled across the yard, heading for the horse barn, beyond the bunkhouse. At the wide doorway, he paused, peering inside. On each side of a wide runway lines of ponies were tied, standing hipshot at feed boxes. Squared timber uprights supported the roof and at the rear hay was stacked. Hung by its bail from a peg on one upright, near the door, a stable lamp, turned low, spread a wan halo of light.

Must be Mackenzie's English ideas, he thought, keeping the saddle stock under cover. Most ranches loosed them in a fenced pasture overnight. Or could be the habit of keeping them close at hand, against the chance of an Indian raid, still clung.

He stepped inside, reached to turn up the wick of the lamp and a triple-pronged pitchfork whizzed past, grazing his neck and impaling itself in the upright. Dabbing past the quivering handle, he swept the lamp off the peg. The lamp blinked out when it hit the ground. Glass tinkled and metal clattered.

By then the Texan had whipped out his six-gun and bellied down. Lying motionless, the hammer of the gun thumbed back, he peered into the gloom around, seeking sight or sound of the would-be assassin. But the darkness yielded nothing beyond a horsey aroma, the pawing of a hoof, the rattle of halters as tied ponies moved restlessly. To his right, the square of the doorway framed starlit sky. Whoever had hurled that pitchfork, he reflected, was

still somewhere in the barn, likely crouched in the darkness, clutching a knife and awaiting a chance to use it.

Lacking a rear exit, they were both trapped. Whoever tried to ease out of the doorway would be silhouetted against starlight and a plain target.

Silently, he eased up to a sitting position, propped his back against the upright and settled himself to outwait the bushwhacker.

As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he began to discern the rumps of ponies stabled on either side. He watched the doorway, gambling that the nerve of the man he guessed was lurking in the obscurity would break before his own.

Time dragged, but the Texan wasn't bothered; he was prepared to wait it out 'til sun-up.

Suddenly there was a clatter of hooves toward the rear of the barn. He abruptly straightened his back, raised his right arm, the .44 latched in his fist. Loosed ponies began to stream past him, their hooves beating a mad tattoo as they pounded down the runway. Manes and tails streaming, they jammed the doorway, scattered. Sitting impotent in the gloom, Pecos could do no more than watch them race by. He grinned with wry humor. His unknown assailant had outsmarted him. It was plain that the hombre had quietly loosed all the ponies at the back of the barn and chowsed them out. Likely, he had been lying flat across the back of one, or clinging to its far side, Comanche style, one leg hooked over its barrel, one hand gripping its mane.

He eased around the frame of the doorway and stood eyeing the dim forms of ponies milling all over the yard. Odds were his quarry had dropped off by now and ducked out of sight—to await another chance to convert Pecos Parker into buzzard bait.

The idea didn't set well. Frowning, the Texan holstered his gun, and dropped down in the shadow of a nearby adobe to mull things over. As he hunkered, he heard the jabber

of talk. Dark forms spilled out of the bunkhouse and began herding the runaways back into the barn. After awhile, peace settled down again, everyplace but in the Texan's mind. He didn't like that bushwhack attempt one bit, and the thought that it might be repeated irked him.

There was only one man on the Barbed M with cause to hate his guts—Manuel Leroux. As far as he knew, no other hombre on the spread even knew him. But Leroux had extended the olive branch, and shown a hankering to be real friendly. He couldn't tag the mestizo with the job without proof.

Remembrance of the lame dun entered his mind. There was the proof, for or against Leroux. If the dun was lame, it likely cleared the caporal. If nothing was wrong with the pony, Leroux had tolled him into the barn and his guilt would be as plain as plowed ground.

He rose, again entered the horse barn, still darkened. Striking a match, he found a stable lamp, touched light to the wick. Lamp swinging from one hand, he moved down the barn, hunting his mount. He found the dun, untied its halter rope and led it out into the runway. There was no trace of lameness.

So Leroux had lied, he thought, with taut anger. The double-crossing son had faked friendliness to trick him into visiting the barn, where one of the caporal's cohorts waited with a hay fork to skewer him.

Just what were Leroux and Guttman trying to hide? Whatever it was, it was plain they craved no interference from a pesky stranger. Bucking the caporal and the crew, he'd have less chance of surviving than a rabbit in a wolf's jaws. Eliminate Leroux and the odds would even up.

With Pecos, to think was to act. He returned the dun to its stall, blew out the lamp and headed for the bunkhouse.

The door stood ajar. He kicked it open, stepped inside

and stood looking dourly around. The bunkhouse was long and narrow, rough-walled. Two tiers of bunks were built along one side. Soft light from stable lamps dangling from the vigas washed over the forms of perhaps twenty vaqueros —they lay stretched on their bunks, sat on benches mending saddlery, or just sprawled idly around. Four were gathered at a plank table, fingering greasy cards.

At the stranger's sudden entrance, the card players forgot their game, staring. Talk cut off. Every head swiveled in the direction of the intruder. Amid tight silence, Leroux slid off a lower bunk and sauntered toward the Texan. Somehow, Pecos was reminded of the approach of a panther, except that a panther never masked his ferocity behind a guileless smile.

"You are troubled, amigo?" inquired the caporal politely, coming to a stop half a dozen paces from the visitor.

"Wouldn't you be," inquired Pecos, "if a jasper tried to skewer you with a pitchfork?"

"A pitchfork!" Leroux's eyebrows raised. "You joke, señor."

"Is ordering my killing a joke?" bit back the Texan.

"Order your killing!" The caporal smiled, with his lips. He shrugged. "You must be loco—or you swallow too much tequilla, perhaps."

"I'd be loco to give you another chance to beef me," snapped Pecos. "I got you pegged as a double-crossing son of a bitch. Either you or me leave here feet first, Leroux. Go for your gun!"

Right hand caressing the butt of his .44, he waited, tense.

Brittle silence held the bunkhouse. Although few of the vaqueros understood English, there was no mistaking the meaning of the yanqui's words and action. Their caporal had earned a reputation as a killer. With tight anticipation, they waited for him to kill again.

But Leroux stood stock still, arms held away from his

body, palms outspread, to indicate plainly that he was not in a mood to draw.

"Get a wiggle on—yellerbelly!" mocked Pecos.

Leroux's tongue ran over his lips. "I have no quarrel weeth you." The words squeezed out of a tight throat.

"But I've got one with you," threw back the Texan. His tone brittled with impatience. "Jerk that iron or saddle up —and vamoose."

Smoldering caldrons of frustrated rage, Leroux's dark eyes met the challenge of the Texan's cold gaze. Hoarsely, he averred, "I am your fr—"

"Git!" Pecos cut in. He lifted his gun from the holster. "Or take a slug. I gamble you'll bleed yellow."

Without further word, the caporal pivoted, slowly walked back to his bunk, followed by the wondering eyes of the entire crew. Slack-jawed with surprise and shock, the vaqueros watched him roll up his soogans.

Standing against the door jamb, slate-gray eyes registering every movement in the tensed bunkhouse, Pecos glimpsed one vaquero, lying full length on an upper bunk, stealthily reaching up to the gunbelt hanging from a peg over his head. He slid the gun out of leather. Pecos allowed him to get a good grip on the weapon, cautiously begin to align it, when the Texan again flicked out his own gun. It blurred up, thundered. Thru a haze of powder-smoke he watched the would-be killer writhe on his bunk, blood from a shattered shoulder fast-staining his shirt.

Not a man moved to help him. All were fearfully watching the dread stranger at the end of the room.

Balancing his roped bedroll on one shoulder, while in his free hand he swung a canvas sack, Leroux headed for the door.

When he reached the Texan, Pecos lifted the caporal's gun out of its holster, tossed it aside. He threw the bone-handled knife after it. "A hombre who's scairt to use his

weapons don't need 'em," he said curtly, and hustled the glowering caporal through the doorway. Following, he heard a torrent of excited talk break out behind him.

Ten minutes later, when he returned to the house, the Mackenzie girl was standing on the gallery.

"I heard a shot, a man rode out," she exclaimed, excitement on her voice. "What is happening?"

Briefly, Pecos related how Leroux had tolled him into the horse barn, the hurtling pitchfork and the showdown in the bunkhouse.

"Madre de Dios!" shuddered Dolores. "But for the mercy of the blessed Saints you would have been transfixed—murdered—by this assassin, and you have scarcely set foot on the Barbed M."

"Wal, Leroux beat it," he said shortly. "Now, maybe things will quiet down."

"Not if I know Manuel Leroux," she retorted. "You are a brave man, señor, but unwise. Is it not foolish to allow a rattlesnake a second chance to strike?"

He shrugged, "Mebbe."

"Now Leroux will live only for vengeance."

"Suppose you quit fretting," he suggested, good-humoredly. "We'll handle that mestizo if he butts in again." He yawned, "I'm for the hay."

Yanking off his boots, it entered his mind that Dolores' first thought had been for his welfare. "So what?" he asked himself. She needed his gun. That's what she'd hired—a fast gun to ease her out of a jam. And that's all she was interested in. Come to think of it, he pondered, that's all anyone had ever been interested in, ever since Kiowas had wiped out his parents in a moonlight raid. Gunfighting paid a heap better than nursing cows, but it was a lonesome business.

VII

THE JANGLING OF a steel cleaver on iron awoke Pecos. The room in which he slept was still darkened, although the narrow length of the slit window showed gray, heralding the dawn. That racket would be the crew's breakfast call, he decided sleepily and sat up. Likely the girl figured he should take Leroux's place; someone had to handle the hands. And he just didn't savor the job—rodding twenty or more wild vaqueros with the certainty that at least a fistful of them itched to plant a knife in his back. Why in thunder had he allowed that good-looking señorita to bluff him into tangling with the Barbed M's troubles? He should have shook her in Santa Fe and beat it back to Texas. Dammit, he was a gunfighter, not a ranch foreman.

With no enthusiasm, he swung his legs off the bed and fumbled for his boots. In no haste to assume the unwanted obligation of caporal, he spilled water from a pitcher into the china bowl on the washstand, sluiced off, lathered his face and scraped the bristles off his jaw.

When he stepped out onto the gallery, Dolores and one of the vaqueros who had sided her in Santa Fe were standing there, trading talk. The girl swung around and exclaimed, her dark eyes glowing, "Our new caporal! This is Andreo, he will be your segundo. Andreo speaks some English. He will relay your orders and see that they are obeyed."

"Orders!" protested the Texan. "Heck, ma'am, I don't even know my way around the spread." Seemed he stood

ace-high after booting Leroux off the place. Why in thunder couldn't the girl realize his only asset was a fast gun?

"I will show you around later," she promised, and turned to Andreo again, firing a stream of liquid Spanish. The grizzled veteran moved off, trudging toward the cookshack.

"Andreo is a good man," she confided to Pecos. "He is loyal and has served our family many years. He knows what tasks demand attention and will set the men to work."

"Good for Andreo!" grunted the Texan, and made a smoke.

Together, they stood watching a stream of dark-visaged riders drain out of the cookshack, fashioning and smoking their cornhusk cigarittos. For awhile the yard was a confusion of bucking broncs, fogging dust, and crackling Spanish oaths as the men readied their mounts for the day's ride. The dust settled, the uproar abated, and quiet gradually returned as the vaqueros jogged out, two by two. When the last pair vanished into the shadows that still draped the valley, the girl smiled. It was plain that Leroux's departure had taken a load off her shoulders.

"Let us eat," she invited. "Then we will ride."

They headed north, Pecos at the girl's stirrup and Andreo tagging behind. Sunlight now flooded the sweep of Poroso Valley and dips in the hills sloping down on either side were dark-veined. Grass carpeted the swales over which the three riders jogged, patched by gray-green sage and dark-foliaged mesquite.

Steers were specked amid the brush, gathered in bunches or trailing in long files toward water. On the surface, there seemed to be little amiss with the Barbed M. Aloud, he inquired, "How much range you got, ma'am?"

"The whole valley is ours," she replied offhand. "Eighty thousand acres, that is what my father once claimed. Andreo thinks there is more."

"A slew of range," he mused. "And you say it carried twelve thousand head."

"That was the count."

"Wouldn't you say it was kinda overstocked?"

"We never lacked for grass." A tight note entered her voice. "Now we have too much graze and too few cows."

"What's the tally?"

"Andrea tells me that the round-up revealed less than six thousand. That Leroux, he has been robbing us!" Bitterly, she exploded, "You should have killed the ladrón!"

For all her seeming innocence, this señorita sure took killing lightly, thought Pecos. "Six thousand short," he murmured, "How did Leroux explain it?"

"Rustlers, rustlers, rustlers," she fumed. "And that smiling devil was the biggest rustler of them all."

"Wal," he persisted, "cows don't jest sprout wings and fly. Where you figure that stock was driven?"

"South, across the Border," she replied promptly. "There is always a market in Mexico. They are blind to brands." She lifted her shoulders. "Who needs a bill of sale if the price is right?"

"So the big job is to stop this rustling?"

"It is the only job."

"Wal, I'd say first comb out the crew. Weed out Leroux's followers."

Dolores nodded. "Andreo has already discharged six. Others will go when he can replace them."

"I sure hope the hombre who handled that pitchfork was one of the six," he returned fervently. But the girl paid no heed to his comment. Her frowning gaze was focused on the low-lying hills to the north, over which they had ridden the previous day.

Following her gaze, Pecos saw that the hillsides were specked with what seemed gray-white snowflakes, drifting slowly over the slopes. He blinked and looked again, grasped

that the moving specks were sheep, swarming over the ridges, flooding down onto the flats. "Woolies!" he ejaculated.

"Carl's sheep, a worse plague than grasshoppers," returned the girl, angry-eyed. "Every day they drift further down into our valley."

"It's your range! Get rid of the baa-baas. They destroy the graze and stink up the water."

"You think I haven't tried?" She threw back hotly. "Again and again I ordered Leroux to drive them off—he did nothing! When I complain to Carl, he tells me he is merely collecting interest on a $25,000 debt. I am a girl." Her voice held bitter irony. "What more could I do?"

"You crave the woolies out?"

"With all my heart!"

Pecos swung around in the saddle. "Hey, Andreo!" he called.

The vaquero rode close.

"Can you gather six good men and meet us at the ranch by noon?"

"I weel try, señor."

Pecos grinned. "Try hard—and git going."

When the vaquero spurred away, he turned to the girl. "Let's head back to the ranch," he said. "I've seen enough to know what's needed."

In early afternoon he led a jingling bunch of vaqueros up valley again. More sheep had worked down from the ridges and made a great irregular blotch of moving bodies across the swales.

"Thick as maggots on a carcass," grunted Pecos, who held the typical cowman's distaste for all forms of mutton.

Spreading, the vaqueros began to push the blatting sheep back toward the valley rim. It was a sweaty, wearying task, rounding up scampering bunches of frightened woolies, chowsing them toward the hills, pushing them up the slopes,

racing here, there and everywhere as bands broke up into small clusters, darting and dodging through the squat brush.

The tide had begun to recede, seeping up the slopes, when two rifles began to bark from a bench above the sweating riders. The Barbed M hands pulled back and bunched, startled indecision reflected on their swarthy faces.

"Tail me!" Pecos told Andreo curtly.

He angled off to a flank, until both were hidden from the marksmen above the swelling shoulder of a hill.

"We'll work up and around," said the Texan. "Take the jaspers in the rear." They eased their hard-breathing ponies upward, through a maze of gulleys and cutbanks, emerged upon a rock-littered bench. Bellied down at its brink, two sheepherders were pumping lead down into the valley. Nearby, their saddled mules were tied.

Pecos and the segundo pounded across the bench toward the marksmen. Sound of the ponies' hooves brought the sheepherders' heads around. One dabbed up like a startled jackrabbit and raced for his mule. The other, more stubborn, eased around and began firing at the two riders hurtling toward him.

Andreo's pony went down in a flurry of dust, catapulting the rider across its withers. Mounted now, one sheepherder galloped away in panicky retreat, tilma billowing. Pecos heard the crash of Andreo's mount and swung around in the saddle. The pony lay prone, hooves threshing in its death throes. By its head, the vaquero was stretched out, limp. Bullets from the persistent sheepherder's rifle kicked up spurts of dust or bounced off rocks in droning richochet.

The Texan slid his rifle out of the saddle boot, abruptly checked the foam-flecked dun, flung out of leather and sprawled flat. Levering a shell into the breech, he laid a bead on the marksman, a dusty gray splotch against the arid monotony of rock.

When he squeezed trigger, the other scrambled to his

feet and broke for his mule. Pecos levered, followed the clumsily-racing form with his barrel, triggered again as the Mexican grabbed for the mule's reins. The sheepherder staggered, dropped, wavered to his feet again. A third slug drove him against the mule's barrel. He collapsed like a punctured waterbag and lay unmoving. The mule drifted off, riderless.

Pecos came to his feet, moved over to his dun. Grasping the trailing reins, he mounted and neck-reined the pony in the direction of the fallen man. Assured that the Mexican was not playing possum, he headed back to where Andreo had struggled shakily to his feet. The vaquero stood fingering a huge blue-black bruise on his forehead, eyes still a trifle glassy.

"You all right?" inquired the Texan, reining up.

"Eet is nothing," Andreo assured him wryly. "When the caballo throw me, I heet a rock."

"Lucky that slug hit the horse and not you," commented Pecos. "Climb up!" The segundo clambered up behind him. Riding double, they began to drop down the slope.

Below, the Barbed M riders were bunched, gazing upward. From where they sat their ponies, the action on the bench had been hidden. Pecos waved them on. They spread out again and took after the widely scattered bands of sheep.

The sun was sinking when the last woolie scrambled over the rim of the valley. Some carcasses remained. Pecos stood on the edge of a ragged escarpment, eyeing gray-white bodies splattered among boulders at its base. A band of sheep, terror-stricken, had charged over the brink and plunged to their death below.

The Texan's dust-grimed features crinkled with amusement as he pictured Carl Guttman's face when the surviving sheepherder rode in with news of the Barbed M's belligerence. Guttman wasn't the type to take the loss of a

herder and a fistful of sheep lying down. There'd likely be hell to pay. But maybe in the future the sheepman would keep his woolies off Barbed M range.

The Texan's hunch that Guttman wouldn't swallow his setback in silence quickly proved out. The following morning, after the crew had ridden out, Pecos was drifting around the spread sizing up the various buildings when the expected visitor rode in. In Santa Fe, Guttman had been attired like a banker. Now he wore work clothes—flannel shirt, levis, black felt hat. A gunbelt was buckled around his thick waist.

Pecos saw him pull rein outside the house, stamp across the gallery and slam inside. He emerged shortly, in company with Dolores. Pecos sauntered across the yard to meet them. It was plain that the two had already clashed. The girl's features were tense and her eyes stormy; Guttman's outjutting jaw and frosty mien told their own story.

Glowering, the sheepman strode up to Pecos. "So you're the jughead who killed one of my herders and slaughtered a slew of valuable sheep!" he barked.

"Sure!" admitted the Texan coolly. "In Texas we call it self-defense. The hombre I plugged threw lead at me first. As for the woolies, what in hell were they doing on Barbed M range?"

"No one's objected before," snapped Guttman. "You forgetting that I have a stake in this ranch?"

"I've objected!" cut in the girl.

"You crave to stay out of trouble?" drawled Pecos, eyeing the irate sheepman. "Stick to your own side of the hills."

Guttman pivoted to face the girl. "I'm through babying you," he rasped. "You import this gunman and discharge the one good man you had, now you let this fellow run wild. Kick him off the place right now, or I'll file suit and collect the $25,000 that's coming to me."

"Pecos stays!" she flung back.

"You asked for it!" The sheepman's blue eyes, iced with cold rage, focused on Pecos. "Maybe you need a dose of your own medicine, mister!" With that, he strode away.

The two watched him stamp back to his pony, mount and pull out.

"I'd say that hombre was in a horn-tossing, sod-pawing mood," chuckled the Texan.

"In a mood to dispossess us," returned Dolores tightly.

"Using that loan as a club." Pecos raised his shoulders. "Wal, I'd say it'll take months to push that claim through the courts if you put up a fight."

"You think so?" The girl eyed him hopefully.

"Sure do!"

She sighed. "Fate has not been kind to the Mackenzies, señor. First, my brother Jack died last summer on the Arkansas River; then a rustler's bullet crippled my father. Now there is this debt, hanging over me like a black cloud." Impulsively, she grasped his shirted arm. "I need you! It was indeed a happy thought that took me to the baile in Santa Fe."

Pecos resisted a crazy impulse to take her in his arms. "You hired me to do a job," he grunted, "and I'm doing it."

They turned and walked toward the house.

"What did Carl mean by a dose of your own medicine?" she asked suddenly.

Pecos grinned and slapped his holster.

"I don't understand," frowned Dolores.

"You hired a gunfighter. Why couldn't Guttman follow suit?"

"Oh!" she ejaculated, then added hopefully, "but you shoot very fast and straight."

"There's likely some who shoot faster and straighter," he returned laconically. "Maybe I should draw my time and beat it."

The girl checked, eyeing his impassive features with amazed shock, then she smiled. "Señor," she said composedly, "you are not the kind who runs, like the rabbit."

VIII

THE BARBED M drowsed in siesta. Pecos slacked on a rocker in the shade of the gallery, smoking. Nearby, Dolores idly leafed the pages of a dog-eared magazine. The Texan chewed his cigarette, eyeing the sun-swept yard and figuring he'd never had it so good. He was living high on the hog. The pay was liberal, the company pleasant and, with Andreo handling the crew, there was just nothing to bother him. In fact, he just couldn't see how he qualified for a pay check.

But he couldn't forget that slowly, steadily, stock was being drained away—and there didn't seem to be a thing he could do about it. Andreo was insistent that Leroux was tied up with the rustlers, but locked his lips and raised his shoulders when Pecos probed for reasons for his belief. The mestizo still had cohorts among his crew; Pecos didn't doubt that. But if he cleaned out the whole bunch, how far ahead would he be? Leroux could plant his pards among new hands hired to replace them.

He'd questioned the crew and come up with nothing beyond blank stares and helpless shrugs. What he needed, he decided, was a bunch of hard-riding, fast-shooting Texas punchers—and Texans seemed to be as scarce as hen's

teeth in this part of New Mexico Territory. This was vaquero country. He had to work with what he had.

Dolores lay down her magazine and watched his frowning features with amusement. "You are troubled, señor," she teased. "Maybe thoughts of the gunman Carl may send to shoot you are not pleasant."

He jerked out of his abstraction and eyed her glumly. "When Lady Luck turns thumbs down, ma'am," he drawled, "I'll likely qualify for boothill. But I sure don't lose any sleep chewing on that unhappy event. What I got on my mind is cows. Barbed M cows. If the holes aren't plugged. this spread is liable to be drained dry."

She shrugged. "You think that is ever far from my thoughts? Yet every vaquero knows where the cows go and perhaps when they go."

His brow creased. "You telling me that every man on the payroll is crossing the spread?"

Dolores wriggled to a more comfortable position. "No," she told him forcefully. "Many of the vaqueros are loyal, they have been riding for my father for years. Their hearts are sad, their regrets many, but they are helpless."

"Helpless!" he snapped. "Loyal! If they're wise to the brand-blotchers why in thunder don't they open their yaps?"

"A knife in the back is not pleasant," she retorted dryly. "And that would be their swift reward. Do you not think they know it?"

"So they're scairt?"

She made a gesture toward the blue-shadowed hills silhouetted beyond the buildings. "Leroux lurks out there, but his eyes are in the bunkhouse."

"And we set around, while his pards rob us blind!" The Texan's tone was edged with disgust.

"What else can we do?" she inquired calmly.

He fingered his chin, searching for an answer. It seemed that locating the leaks was akin to pinning down a sha-

dow. They were there, but where? Then he became conscious of a slim leg, carelessly uncovered, not an arm's length away. His thoughts took a more earthy turn.

"Well?" she challenged.

"Truth to tell, ma'am," he confessed, aware that his pulse was speeding, "I had my mind on a kitten, a soft, silky kitten." He eased the rocker a mite closer.

A slow smile curved her cheeks. "Never forget, señor," she said softly, "that kittens have claws." With that, a hand dabbed beneath her skirt, tossing it back and revealing a flash of smooth thigh, as she whipped out a slim stiletto from beneath a garter.

Startled, the Texan jerked back.

"Yep!" he agreed, wryly. "Sharp claws! And they kin use 'em, too."

"Manuel Leroux has cause to know," she returned composedly. She slipped the sliver of steel out of sight again. Mockery was reflected in the depths of her dark eyes as she weighed him.

"You would not risk a sharp claw?"

Pecos met her glance, lean features imperturbable. "I've risked more, for less," he returned noncommittally.

Their crosstalk was interrupted by the thud of hooves. A rider jogged into the yard. He was a rawboned, muscular fellow, with high cheekbones and coppery features. He straddled a calico with careless grace. Greasy hair curled in ringlets below his ears and his lips made a bleak slit below a thin beak of a nose. He wore a soiled red shirt, denim pants, a battered old Stetson, and he packed twin guns.

"A stranger!" exclaimed the girl. "A Mexican? No!"

"He's no stranger to me," Pecos told her curtly. "His moniker's Yuma Pete." His tone sharpened. "Git inside the house, ma'am!"

"So it's Carl's gunman!" murmured Dolores and remained unmoving, her interested gaze following the visitor.

With no indication that he had glimpsed the two seated on the gallery, the rider drifted past, dismounted at the water trough, gave his pony a brief drink, and tied it. Then he hitched up his gunbelt and scuffed through the ankle-deep dust toward them.

"Git inside!" reiterated Pecos, straightening. "There'll be lead flying." He stepped off the gallery, out into the sun-glare. He began pacing toward the stranger, arms limp at his sides, the fingers of his right hand half-curled.

Excitement stirring in her dark eyes, the girl sat entranced, watching.

The two men were closing when the gunman Pecos had called Yuma checked suddenly. His restless eyes, heavy-lidded, telegraphed startled surprise. "B'gawd!" he ejaculated, his tone as rasping as though it had been sifted through cinders. "Ef it ain't Pecos Parker."

"Didn't Guttman say?" flung back the Texan.

"He sure didn't," growled Yuma.

"Wal, I'm waiting!" Pecos stood poised in a slight crouch, fingers itching at the smooth butt of his holstered six-gun.

Yuma raised both arms in quick denial. "Hold it!" he yelled. "I ain't framing to match no cutter with you, Pecos."

"Then why in hell did you ride over?"

"Tangled my spurs, I guess," grated the 'breed. "This Guttman hairpin braced me in Santa Fe. Offered $500 gold for the scalp of a Texan who'd been hired as caporal of this ranch. I figured it easy money."

"You kin still take a stab at earning it."

Yuma grinned, exposing yellowed teeth. "Nope, Pecos. I seen you in action."

"Then light a shuck," barked the Texan. "And take word to Guttman I'll be following the same trail, within the hour, hell-bent for a showdown."

"Glad to oblige," returned the gunman. He turned, began to saunter toward his pony. Pecos slowly backed in the direction of the gallery—he knew Yuma!

Before the gunman had taken six paces he spun around, poised to draw. Pecos checked and stood watching him, thumbs hooked in his gunbelt.

Yuma grinned, raised a hand in farewell and turned away. Pecos remained unmoving, following the visitor's every motion as Yuma loosed his reins, hauled into the saddle and jauntily rode out.

Dolores was still curled in the rocker when Pecos returned to the gallery.

"So he refused to fire—upon a friend?" she queried.

"Friend!" grunted Pecos. "That sidewinder would gun his own mother down for a dollar. He backed down, but he sure won't quit—not 'til he collects that five hundred. Guess I'll throw a saddle on the dun."

"You're not leaving?" The girl came to her feet with quick alarm.

"Sure am. But I'll be back. I gotta git Yuma afore he gets me."

An old wagon trail to the sheepman's headquarters ran across the hills at the north end of the valley where the vaqueros had turned back the sheep. Thence it led northwest, to terminate at Guttman's ranch, set in a fold of the hills some ten miles beyond.

Pecos nourished no illusions regarding Yuma Pete. Yuma, he knew, would just as soon shoot a man from the back as the front, as proven in the Barbed M yard. The 'breed killed with as much unconcern as the average man spat. Not only would he buck at confessing to Guttman that he had sidestepped a showdown, but he'd hate to ride away and leave five hundred dollars behind him.

Yuma figured he—Pecos—would follow along the same trail within the hour. The Texan's knowledge of the 'breed's

reputation told him that the gunman would likely linger on the trail for the express purpose of bushwhacking him. Then Yuma could pack his carcass to Guttman's place and collect the blood money.

It was a guess, but he'd stake his saddle he'd guessed right. There was one sure way to find out.

Raising his pony to a canter, he headed for the eastern side of the valley. When the terrain began to bulge and merge with the lower slopes of the hills, he swung north. Below, and ahead, dust smoked lazily over the flats, marking Yuma's progress.

The Texan worked higher. Here the slopes were broken and brushy, split by an occasional ravine. He crested the rim and rode through waves of sagebrush-covered hills, then hit another tangle of upended terrain. When he finally veered westward, the Solano Hills lay behind him.

He cut the old wagon road that led to Guttman's place, dismounted, slackened cinches and built a cigarette, figuring his next move. The likeliest spot for an ambush was where the trail meandered through the Solano Hills. South of the hills, the flat floor of the valley offered little cover; north of the hills, the terrain was rolling, open. Odds were Yuma had forted up in the hills.

Again he hit leather, riding south now, edgy as a teased cat, eyes restless as he scanned the trail ahead, alert for sight of a startled bird, a circling buzzard, a scared jackrabbit. If he made a miscue, he'd never know it—Yuma's slug would terminate any further interest.

It was hot in the barren hills, a blistering heat that reflected from sundered rock and canyon walls, plastering the shirt against his back. The dun suddenly jerked to a stop and fiddle-footed. Its rider's hand flew to the holster. Pecos relaxed, cursing raw nerves as a rattlesnake glided across the trail, seeking deeper shade. Nothing else moved.

A brooding quiet held the hills. Distant buzzards danced like black gnats through currents of heated air.

The trail seemed to twist upward forever, but there was no sign of the gunman. Maybe he'd guessed wrong, thought Pecos. Maybe Yuma had ridden right through and was now at Guttman's place, reporting his failure. But that didn't add up right, not for anyone who knew the 'breed.

The pony emerged on the cluttered bench from which Dolores had shown him the Barbed M when they rode out from Santa Fe. Seemed he had wasted plenty sweat on a bet that hadn't paid off, considered Pecos. Then something moved ahead, indistinct through the pulsating, heated air. He reined up, squinting across the bench, and his nerves tightened. A calico pony took form, tied by a huge boulder. Beyond it the wagon road narrowed, funneling between rugged shoulders of rock and snaking down to the valley.

Yuma sure had an eye for a likely ambush spot, reflected the Texan. Forted up in the cut, he could pick off a rider toiling up the trail from the valley at will.

Dismounting, he led the dun behind a spreading mesquite and knotted its reins around a branch. In no haste, he unstrapped his spurs, hung them on the horn, and slid his Winchester out of the boot. Levering a shell into the breech, he began to ghost across the bench, ducking from boulder to boulder, working toward the calico.

Closer, he dropped to hands and knees, cautiously worming through squat moisture-starved brush. Closing on the animal, he raised upon one knee, rifle slanted, hunting sign of his quarry.

Yuma lay sprawled in the cut, facing downhill, his red shirt patched against the gray dust. He had rolled two boulders onto the trail, and set them about a foot apart. His rifle barrel was thrust between them.

The 'breed was not fifty paces distant; Pecos could have

bored him with ease. But he had an innate distaste for shooting a man—any man—in the back. He yelled. The 'breed's head swiftly pivoted. His dusky features mirrored surprise at sight of the crouched form in his rear. He grabbed the rifle, began frenziedly squirming around the base of one boulder to gain cover. Pecos squeezed trigger. Chips flew from the rock wall beyond the gunman. Quickly, Pecos levered; aligned again. With the second whipcrack, Yuma jerked spasmodically, then lay still. Shamming dead maybe, considered the Texan, peering at the prone form through powder haze. It was an old trick and sometimes a slick hombre pulled it off. He levered another shell home. Carefully he laid a bead on the red shirt and loosed lead for the third time. The slack form quivered before the impact of the bullet. That was all.

Pecos came to his feet, beat the dust off his shirt and pants. Then he moved forward slowly, Winchester levelled.

Reaching the slack form, he kicked the rifle, lying in limp fingers, to one side. Then, with a boot, he hooked the body over onto its back. Yuma was dead, there was no doubt about it now. His bristled jaw was slack and his dull eyes stared blindly at the sky. One slug had drilled through his throat. The second shot had slammed into his hairy chest.

Hooking the dead man beneath the armpits, Pecos dragged the body to the calico. Boosting it across the saddle, he lashed it in place with Yuma's own rope. Then he led the pony back along the trail to his own mount. Yuma had paid for his treachery. Now, decided the Texan, it was Guttman's turn for a showdown.

IX

DESPITE THE stench of sheep, Guttman's ranch had an aspect of stark, sanitary cleanliness. The long, low adobe house, shearing sheds, barns, pens—even the fence posts—were whitewashed, reflecting a glare harsh on the Texan's sun-weary eyes.

Every square foot of ground around the whitened buildings had been cleared of weeds; every foot had been carefully raked over. There was no litter of discarded bottles, such as fringed the Barbed M bunkhouse. Pecos had the feeling that even a cigarette butt would have been out of place.

Sombreroed Mexicans in ragged tilmas moved purposefully around. It was plain that no idlers were tolerated on Guttman's payroll.

The blatting of sheep made an unceasing, plaintive chorus in the Texan's ears when he rode up to the house. Dismounting, he sharply knuckled a closed door.

The knock brought a woman, a shapely woman with the same oval cast of features as Dolores, and her grace of carriage. There the resemblance ended. This woman lacked the regal disdain and fiery mien of the Mackenzie girl. She somehow reminded Pecos of a whipped dog. Uneasy apprehension flickered in her dark eyes, and gray streaked the luxuriant sweep of her glossy black hair. She wore the white linen camisa and woollen skirt of the peasant. A filmy rebozo draped her head and shoulders.

This must be Juanita, the Mackenzie girl Guttman had married; but her air of servility was strangely different from the cool independence of Dolores. "Guttman around?" he inquired brusquely.

"Carl is in his office," she told him, her tone lifeless. "It is beyond the house." Then she glimpsed the body roped across the calico behind him. Her eyes sought his quickly.

"That—that is this Pecos?" she quavered.

"Nope. I'm Pecos, ma'am. I'm delivering Yuma, the hombre your husband hired to beef me."

"So you killed him!" A light kindled in her eyes. "You have come to kill Carl, too! The Saints will bless you, señor."

He stared, perplexed. "Say, ain't you Juanita, Guttman's wife?"

She nodded.

"And you're telling me you crave your husband curled up? Heck, ma'am, that's no way for a wife to walk."

"You think not?" A taut belligerency crept into her tone. "Will you be so good as to step inside, señor?"

He followed her into a low-ceilinged room, starkly furnished. To his amazement she brushed the reboza aside, slipped the camisa off her shoulders with a swift gesture, and exposed the bare, smooth curve of her back, from neck to waist, a smoothness that was blemished and pitted with scars, some old and some scarce-healed.

"Now," she challenged, her tone laced with bitterness, "do you still wonder why I wish Carl dead? He breaks everyone to his will. On me he uses a rawhide quirt." She slid the camisa back into place, and swung to face him. With a tired smile, she added, "He hates every Mackenzie and vents his venom upon me."

Pecos eyed her, frowning. "Heck," he said. "Why in thunder don't you quit the buzzard?"

"Quit!" She threw back her head and laughed, a cackle which held no humor. "Where would I go? If I flee to Santa Fe he will follow, drag me back and perhaps beat me to death. Take refuge at the Barbed M? My father lies help-

less. Who else could protect me? Go to a neighbor? We have no neighbors, beyond his peons. Then there is one I cannot leave."

She moved across the room to a rear window, beckoned. Pecos peered out. Playing in a shaded pen outside was a sturdy tow-headed youngster. "That is Hans," she said softly. "My son. All I have to live for. Carl has taken the quirt to him, too. He is determined to break our boy's spirit as he has broken mine." Her voice broke. "Do you wonder that I pray for release?"

The Texan eyed her, forehead furrowed. Thought of Dolores and her stiletto entered his mind. He had a hunch that if she had been in her sister's place the problem would have been solved long since, probably with the first quirting.

"Ma'am," he said apologetically, "I reckon this is none of my business."

"They say your business is killing—with the gun," she replied stonily.

He smiled with patient toleration. "Reckon you got the wrong notion about me, and you're not the first. Sure my trade is gunfighting. I fight with a gun, but I bar murder. Could be," he added hopefully, "I could prod the sidewinder into drawing."

The sparkle that returned to Juanita's eyes at sight of the child faded, replaced by dull apathy. "He will not draw, against you," she replied tonelessly. "He is too clever. Adios, señor!" Without further word, she led the way to the door.

Leading the two ponies, Pecos moved past the house. About fifty paces beyond a small square adobe stood alone. A long, latticed window cut in its front would allow anyone within to survey the activities of practically the entire ranch. Through the window, the Texan glimpsed Guttman's

close-cropped blond head bent over a desk, engrossed with papers spread before him.

Without knocking, Pecos threw open the door and jingled in.

The office was furnished as starkly as the house. Beyond the desk, Guttman's swivel chair, and a filing cabinet, there was nothing—not even an extra chair. Guttman apparently preferred to make his visitors stand. A gunbelt hung from a peg, a black sombrero and a plaited quirt hooked over it.

At the Texan's abrupt entry, Guttman's bullet head jerked up. Pecos read quick shock in the pale blue eyes.

With a muttered oath, the blocky sheepman spun around in the swivel chair, sprang to his feet. "What do you want here?" he demanded tightly.

"The five hundred smackers you promised for a killing," returned Pecos blandly. "There's no charge for delivering the carcass." His glance shuttled to the window. Guttman turned, eyed the calico pony and its gruesome burden.

"I know nothing of that man," he snapped.

"You're lying," drawled the Texan. "You know it, I know it. What's more, Yuma spilled his guts. That 'breed was always long on talk." His tone brittled. "Divvy up, Guttman! Or do I feed you a slug?"

The sheepman's eyes flicked toward his own gunbelt. "Get out!" he barked. "Before I have you thrown out. There are a dozen peons within call."

"Call 'em!" taunted Pecos, and fingered the butt of his holstered gun. "I gamble their time won't beat a bullet's."

The sheepman hesitated, gaze straying to the forms of men moving around the buildings outside. Then, as if realizing the futility of summoning help, he raised his broad shoulders and slid open a drawer of the desk. "This is robbery," he declared, a new note of unconcern in his voice. "But, seeing that there's no option, I'll pay."

The Texan's eyes narrowed. Intuition told him that Guttman had some trick in mind, but the sheepman merely lifted out a fat buckskin pouch. While his visitor watched closely, he unknotted the rawhide thong that secured its neck with stubby fingers, spilled a glittering stream of double-eagles on the desk top.

"Five hundred, I think you said," he commented casually. He began sliding the yellow coins into a small stack, counting aloud. When twenty-five pieces were gathered, he thrust them toward Pecos with a careless gesture. Some of the coins toppled over the desk edge, tinkling onto the beaten earth floor. The Texan ducked down to retrieve them, but his eyes never left Guttman's hands. He saw the sheepman dab back into the open drawer, snatch up a twin-barreled derringer.

Before the stubby weapon cleared the drawer, Pecos' right arm swung swiftly, took Guttman across the throat and knocked him backward. While the sheepman teetered, off-balance, the Texan jumped him. Pecos' left hand latched onto the derringer, forcing it backward; his other hand fastened upon Guttman's thick neck. The gun clattered to the floor, but the sheepman wrenched free. Head lowered, he charged at the tall Texan. His bullet head, like a battering ram, took Pecos below the belt, butting him back against the wall. Gasping for breath, the Texan tried to fend off his stocky opponent, but Guttman, a chunky tornado of hard muscle and bone, bored in, smashing savagely with his fists, butting with his head. Still winded, and wilting before the impact, Pecos slid down. Guttman's right knee pistoned up into his groin. The agony of the impact doubled him up. A vicious kick took him in the mouth and he felt the warm flow of blood over his split lips.

Snarling like a maddened mastiff, the sheepman took a quick step backward, steadied to launch another kick at the bent head of his opponent. But Pecos was no stranger to

saloon dogfights, where anything went and the price of defeat was maiming or death. His heaving lungs were sucking in air now. He glimpsed the swinging boot, grabbed it with both hands and levered upward.

Guttman thudded down onto his back, kicked free, rolled and bounced up like a rubber ball—to stagger as a hard right slammed into his jutting jaw. The blow jarred Pecos to the shoulder, but the sheepman rolled back on his heels, blue eyes dimmed. The Texan hooked him beneath the jaw with another vicious punch, followed with a looping left that dropped Guttman with a crash. Blood welling from a mashed nose, the sheepman lay inert, red foam bubbling from between his lips. Pecos stood eyeing the prostrate form, his chest heaving. Guttman was out and seemed likely to remain that way. Moving slowly, half-bent to ease the pain in his groin, Pecos moved to the desk, emptied the buckskin pouch over its top. Carefully, he counted out twenty-five gold pieces, swept them into a palm and dropped them into a pocket. This done, he stepped slowly to the doorway.

That kneeing had almost crippled him, he reflected ruefully. Maybe he would show better sense if he stuck to a gun.

Alert for more trouble, he moved outside. But if any of Guttman's hands had been aware of the fracas in the office it was plain they thought it better to ignore it. Beyond furtive glances, no one paid him attention when he hauled into the saddle and rode out.

The calico, a dead man stiffening across its saddle, stood patiently in the sunglare.

X

RIDING BACK TO the Barbed M through the lonely hills, Pecos pondered on the problem of the Mackenzies' fast diminishing herds. Seemed rustlers had always plagued the spread, he cogitated. The Old Man had been cut down by a brand-blotcher's slug. Now Dolores claimed that Leroux, the former caporal, was loose in the hills with a renegade gang, and was fast bleeding the spread to death. Maybe Leroux had been double-crossing the iron right along. Every vaquero in the crew knew of Leroux's activities, she claimed, but fear of the mestizo's long arm—latched onto a knife—locked their lips. Maybe gold would loosen their tongues.

That evening he sauntered into the bunkhouse. Instantly, the drone of talk cut off. Stealthy glances slanted in his direction and slid away. His own glance flicked over swarthy faces, held on Andreo. The segundo came forward, a cigarito between his lips.

"You seek for me, señor?" he inquired.

"Yep," said the Texan. "Pass this on to the boys—I know that Leroux and his gang are looting the spread. Soon the señorita will have nothing, no dinero to pay wages, then the jaspers will all lose their jobs. I will pay $100 gold for a guide to Leroux's hideaway."

The weathered old segundo turned and addressed the silently watching vaqueros in flowing Spanish. Pecos guessed, by the hissing emphasis on his tone, that the message was losing nothing in the telling. When he was through, the Texan gestured him outside.

"Wal?" queried Pecos, as they stood in the shadowed yard. "You figure gold will loosen any tongues?"

The segundo shrugged.

"Maybe it'll loosen yours," prodded Pecos.

"Madre de Diablo!" bristled the old vaquero. "Do you accuse me of betraying my trust? I have served the Mackenzies faithfully these many years."

"Nope," the Texan assured him. "I jest figure that Leroux's got you boogered."

"Señor," the segundo assured him earnestly, "I am helpless. I know that the picaro raids, that he has followers among the crew, that he is as elusive as a shadow. Beyond that, I know nothing."

"Wal," the Texan told him resignedly, "pass word around that I'll be setting on the gallery—and $100 gold ain't chicken feed."

He crossed the yard, dropped onto a rocker on the darkened gallery, and made a smoke. Some of those hombres in the bunkhouse were selling out the Barbed M, he reflected. If they'd 'cross the spread, they'd 'cross Leroux—for a price. Maybe he hadn't made the price high enough.

He settled himself to wait, eyeing the empty yard. It was silvered by moonlight. The rustle of a dress brought his head around. Dolores' throaty voice reached his ears. "You meditate—alone?"

As vague as a ghost and almost as silent, she sank into a rocker close by. Again he was conscious of heady excitement.

To make talk, he inquired, "How's the old man?"

"He lies, as always, like one dead." She leaned toward him, eyes luminous. "Was your ride—fruitful?"

"I packed Yuma's body to the Guttman place."

"So you stung the scorpion," she breathed. "And Carl—was he enraged?"

"He sure didn't act pleased, but he divvied up $500 for the chore."

Her soft laughter rippled through the darkness. "You kill his gunman and empty his purse. How I would have loved

to have been there." She sobered. "He will never forgive, or forget."

"I guess not," returned Pecos, with no interest. "Right now I've got Leroux on my mind. I just baited a trap with a chunk of Guttman's gold. Maybe I'll get a nibble." He told of his offer in the bunkhouse.

She eased her chair closer. In the faint light he could see the white oval of her features, the dark pools of her eyes, and knew she was watching, and waiting. Waiting for what? For a chance to use that stiletto?

He sat silent and impassive, battling her allure.

"You are not an impulsive man, like Leroux," she murmured, derision spicing her soft tone. Then its timbre changed. "There is a mouse, no, two mice, about to sniff at the bait."

Two forms loomed by the bunkhouse door, growing larger as they plowed across the yard. Dolores rose quietly and slipped away.

As the two neared, Pecos recognized Andreo's sturdy form, a squat vaguero plodding beside him. They mounted the gallery.

"Theese is Enrique," said the segundo. "He can tell you what you wish to know."

Pecos eyed the vaquero, a heavyset fellow, features shadowed by the wide brim of his sombrero. Plainly ill at ease, he stood shuffling.

"What does he know?" inquired the Texan.

"The whereabouts of Leroux's hideaway in the hills, where cows are gathered, then driven south across the Border."

"Does he work with Leroux?"

"He swears no, señor. He and Rogierio, who rides with him, stumbled upon the hideaway while they were hunting strays in the hills."

"Bueno!" approved Pecos. This, he thought, was his lucky day. "Listen, Andreo. At sunup pick a dozen men you can

trust. We'll have this hombre guide us and hit Leroux where it hurts."

"A dozen men I can trust!" repeated the segundo ironically. He traded talk with the vaquero, then addressed Pecos again. "Enrique craves the gold now. It is not that he does not trust an Americano, but he weel be forced to flee after the raid, or Leroux will surely kill him."

"Nope!" decided the Texan forcefully. Pay off Enrique and the jasper would likely slide away before dawn. "He gets the gold when we hit the hideaway."

More animated talk flowed between the two. Finally, Andreo said, "He is satisfied, señor. Buenos noches!"

Pecos watched the two trudge off, fade into the shadow of the bunkhouse. At last, he reflected with mounting satisfaction, he had a chance to slap back at Leroux. With quickened step and high good humor, he moved toward the open doorway of the house—and collided with a girlish form standing motionless on the threshold. With a startled oath, he jerked to a stop.

"So Enrique talked!" Dolores' excited tones came from the darkness.

"And you didn't miss a word of the play," he retorted, squinting vainly into the gloom in an attempt to focus on her.

"They are my steers," she replied demurely.

"You acquainted with this Enrique hombre?"

"He is a cowhand." Her voice was indifferent. "Slow-witted as a steer and with less enterprise." A taunting note entered her voice, "He is not alone in lack of enterprise."

Pecos dabbed for her blindly. His fingers brushed a slim arm as she twisted away. A listing laugh mocked him. He lunged toward it, stumbled over a chair and fell headlong. The quick patter of her feet and the sound of smothered laughter died as he wryly levered to his feet. Gingerly, he fingered his way across the living room.

Thoughts still on the dark-eyed Dolores, he reached his own room. Next time he cornered that tantalizing little devil, he decided, she sure wouldn't slip away, stiletto or no stiletto.

He turned out at dawn, eager to saddle up and hit for the long-sought hideaway. There was no sign of movement in the house. He'd snatch a bite with the crew, he decided, and stepped out into the yard. Pale fingers of light from the rising sun groped across the heavens, dimming the stars, but the valley was still a pool of darkness. Silence enveloped the bunkhouse like a pall.

With quickening premonition that something had gone amiss, he crossed the yard, threw the door open and stepped inside.

A stable lamp set on the plank table peopled the long, low adobe with uneasy shadow, through which men drifted like wraiths. "Andreo!" he called. The segundo hurried forward, features somber.

"What in creation's got into you hombres?" demanded the Texan irately.

Andreo said nothing, merely beckoned. Pecos followed him down the bunkhouse, past silent, uneasy men. The segundo paused at a lower bunk and pointed. Before he looked, Pecos guessed what he would find. A dead man lay on the bunk, mouth gaping. The front of Enrique's rough shirt was saturated with drying blood and the bone haft of a knife protruded from his chest. He had been stabbed—one swift, killing blow.

"So they got him!" said Pecos softly.

"Leroux has a long arm," returned the segundo soberly.

"And good friends," commented the Texan grimly. "You recognize the knife?"

"It is Enrique's own."

Anger building in his gray eyes, Pecos turned and eyed the vaqueros fidgeting around. Sixteen or eighteen men, he

thought, all as alike to him as peas in a pod. And one was a killer. It would be a waste of time to ask questions. No flock of hens was more flustered by a hovering hawk. They were too scared to talk.

He left the bunkhouse and hunkered against a post of the gallery, gloomily smoking. After awhile, men began to drain out, heading for the cookshack. The usual confused medley of men and horses followed as they rigged their mounts for the day's ride. They pulled out, two by two. One, he noticed, rode alone. That would be the dead man's pard.

He wandered over to the cookshack and swallowed a mug of coffee. He was standing morosely in the doorway when the vaquero who had ridden with Enrique tornadoed into the yard, stirring a fog of dust. Curbing the sweated bay he straddled, the rider swung out of the saddle, gazed around indecisively, then headed for the bunkhouse at a clumsy run.

His interest growing, Pecos followed. Andreo emerged from the bunkhouse, the vaquero in tow. At sight of the Texan, the segundo hurried toward him.

"This is Rogierio." The segundo's voice was high with excitement. " 'E was, what you say, Enrique's pard. 'Ee wishes to avenge the death of his amigo."

"Can he finger the killer?"

"No, señor, he was sleeping. But he rode with Enrique when they sighted the hideaway."

"And he'll lead us to it?" inquired the Texan quickly.

"Sí, Señor, but he will not return to the bunkhouse. He fears that he, too, will die in the night."

"Suits me," snapped Pecos. "Let's ride!" Lady Luck, he thought with a surge of excitement, was smiling again.

Rogierio led them eastward. Their ponies hit the lower slopes of the hills. Beating upward along a shoulder that fingered down into the valley, they crossed a smooth hog-

back and began to work upward again, heading into a tangle of hills veined by canyons.

As they threaded through the twisting ravines, Pecos noticed that the vaquero's uneasy eyes were never still; always they searched the desolation around.

"Rogierio is afraid," confided Andreo. "Every man fears Leroux."

"If he chickens out now," returned Pecos starkly, "I'm liable to beef the bustard myself."

They were beating up a boulder-littered rise when their guide suddenly checked and stepped down. He gestured and exchanged nervous words with Andreo.

"He says," translated the segundo, "that we are close and must be very careful. He fears Leroux may have lookouts."

They ground-hitched their ponies and followed Rogierio up the rise. Ahead, Pecos saw that the terrain broke off abruptly. Nearing the brink, Rogierio snatched off his sombrero and dropped down on his belly, squirming forward. The others followed suit.

They worked up to the crumbling edge and Pecos surveyed a blind canyon that yawned below. "I'll be damned!" he ejaculated.

The canyon was squeezed between precipitous cliffs. A band of green chaparral at the base of the further wall indicated water. Amid it, smoke from a camp fire threaded upward. An adobe hut showed in the greenery. Several antlike forms moved around it.

But what took the Texan's eye were cows grazing over the canyon floor. As thick as horse flies in May, he reflected; there must have been four hundred or more. So this was the hole through which the Barbed M's lifeblood was draining. Well, it had to be plugged, fast.

XI

"I've LAMPED ENOUGH," grunted Pecos and began to edge backward. When they came to their feet, he turned to the segundo. "Can this Rogierio hombre locate the mouth of that canyon after dark?" he inquired.

The vaquero's reaction to the question was plain. He shook his head violently and spread his hands, expostulating.

"Rogierio is afraid to tarry," Andreo told the Texan. "He wishes to ride for the border, pronto. He has avenged Enrique, now he would flee before he joins his amigo in Paraíso."

Leroux sure had the Barbed M bunch boogered, thought Pecos. He dipped into a pants pocket, brought out two double eagles, passed them to the segundo. "Tell the hairpin," he said, "he can grab these right now and add three more if he'll stick around 'til nightfall."

This released another excited discussion between the two Mexicans. Finally Andreo held out a hand, extending the yellow coins in a calloused palm. The Texan heaved a sigh of relief when the swarthy cowhand reluctantly reached for them.

Strung out, the vaquero leading, the three hit the back trail. Pecos tailed Rogierio, his mind busy with plans for the coming night. Andreo brought up the rear.

The sharp crack of a rifle shot bit through the shrouding quiet. Rogierio jerked erect, then collapsed like a rag doll across his pony's withers. Pecos glimpsed a faint cloud

of powdersmoke lazily drifting above a nest of boulders ahead. He raised his reins and roweled, racing for the boulders. A sombreroed form rose among them. The sun glinted upon the steel barrel of a leveled Winchester.

Pecos ducked, urging his pony to greater speed. He held a faint contempt for the average puncher's marksmanship and Mexicans were even poorer shots.

Fire lanced from the Winchester. A slug spun in droning ricochet between the pony's flailing hooves. The marksman loosed another ineffective shot, then ducked down, out of sight. Pecos hurtled up to the rocks, steered his hard-breathing mount between them, gun in his right hand. He sighted the bushwhacker scrambling into the saddle not twenty paces distant, threw a .44 slug at the fleeing man and knew, even as the six-gun bucked in his fist, that he had missed. No man could shoot with accuracy from a moving horse. He curbed the dun, peeled out of leather and slid his Winchester from the saddle boot. The Mexican was astride now, madly quirting his mount. It bounded, like a great shaggy dog, across the flat.

Pecos dropped on one knee, levered, aligned on the racing pony, squeezed trigger. Dust churned as the animal went down. He watched the rider ball up, hit the ground, roll, jump to his feet and dart off like a startled jackrabbit.

Andreo came up at a gallop, checked his mount, eyeing the fleeing form out on the flat.

"Rogierio?" queried the Texan quickly.

"Rogierio is dead," threw back the segundo, his voice harsh with frustration, "but the asesino will not escape. I weel slit his accursed throat." He raised his reins.

Pecos jumped and grabbed the pony's headstall. "You loco?" he barked. "We lost our guide. We need that jasper—alive."

Like hounds coursing a hare, they took off after the fugi-

tive. Exhausted and flayed by the scorching sun, he stopped, stood at bay, six-gun in hand.

"Circle!" yelled Pecos to the segundo. "Drop a loop on the hombre—and no killing!"

Andreo wheeled away. Their quarry loosed useless lead as Pecos rode toward him. A hundred paces or so distant, the Texan checked his mount, sat eyeing the bushwhacker. Hatless, hair a greasy tangle over his head and neck, chest heaving, eyes defiant, the Mexican crouched, the brass buttons down the front of his ragged jacket glinting in the sun.

Pecos never moved a muscle when the cornered Mexican's six-gun blared again. He doubted if there was a vaquero in New Mexico Territory who could hit a barn with a handgun at that distance.

The fugitive half-turned as Andreo wheeled around his rear. Pecos surged forward, shooting to distract their quarry's attention. The segundo thundered in, swinging his rope. The loop whirled through the air, dropped over the vaquero's head and shoulders, tightened with a jerk as Andreo swept past, yanked the fugitive off his feet. Arms pinioned, he bounced over the rough ground behind the fast-moving horse, a shapeless, dust-grayed bundle.

Pecos spurred forward, fearing that the angry segundo would drag the prisoner to his death. There was a streak of savagery in these brown-skinned men, never far below the surface.

But Andreo reined up, dismounted and strode back to the captive, slipped a knife from its sheath and tossed it aside. The prisoner's gun was missing, jerked out of its holster.

"Acquainted with this hombre?" inquired Pecos, coming up at a canter.

Andreo spat. "He is Antonio. The pig rode for the Barbed M until Leroux seduced him."

"Lash his wrists and set him on Rogierio's pony," directed the Texan. "Better pack Rogierio along, too, so we can give the poor bustard decent burial."

Dolores was pacing the gallery when they rode into the yard. She hurried up to Pecos when he dismounted. "There is a dead man in the bunkhouse," she told him, dark eyes perplexed. "And now you have brought in another. Is this Leroux's work?"

"You might say so, ma'am," drawled the Texan, and told of the fate of the two informers.

"So Antonio killed Rogierio." She eyed the scowling prisoner wrathfully. "He is Leroux's tool—and you allow the dog to live?"

"What would you have me do?" inquired Pecos curiously.

"Hang the picaro!" she retorted promptly.

"We need him alive," he pointed out. "He'll lead us to Leroux's hideaway, after sundown."

"He may lead you to your death."

Night shrouded the valley when a bunch of riders jingled away from the ranch. Out of eighteen men, Andreo could only find eight of whose loyalty he was sure. Maybe there were more, he admitted to Pecos, but he dared not take a chance. One traitor would mean disaster.

Like the shadow of a cloud the cavalcade drifted over the swales, the only sound the rattle of bit chains and tinkle of conchas. Pecos rode in the lead. Behind him, the segundo led a pony that carried the prisoner, wrists lashed to the horn.

The segundo pulled up to Pecos' stirrup. "This Antonio is a stubborn fellow, señor," he said, low-voiced. "He fears us, but he fears Leroux even more."

"More than death?" inquired the Texan.

"Maybe, señor."

There were too many uncertainties about this foray, reflected the Texan as they rode through the night. He had a hunch that there was not one vaquero jingling behind him who didn't harbor a fear of the shadowy Leroux. How would they shape up if it came to a fight? Then there was the chance that the rustlers, missing Antonio, would be alerted. Worse, the man they hoped to use as guide was as sullen as a sore-headed dog, and likely as wily as a fox. He just didn't fancy the set-up, but—he asked himself resignedly—what could he do to change it?

They were deep in the hills now, a pale segment of moon spider-webbing the slopes with shadow. Pecos drew rein. The segundo pulled up beside him and the bunch of riders jingled to a stop.

"Guess Antonio leads from now on," said the Texan. "Tell the bustard I'll ride behind him. One yelp and I blow his brains all over creation."

Andreo addressed the prisoner sharply and received a surly, mumbled reply. "The pig swears he knows of no hideaway," relayed the segundo, with disgust.

"Guess he's no use to us, then," returned Pecos offhand. "Reckon we'll just hang him up to dry. Pass that on."

Again there was an angry exchange.

"He swears by the Saints he cannot lead," declared Andreo.

The Texan looked around and spotted a twisted cedar, grotesque in the wan light. Every eye followed as he rode up to it, dismounted, and lifted down his rope. In no haste, he tossed one end across a branch overhead, shook it down, made a loop and beckoned.

Andreo loosed the sullen prisoner from the horn, hauled him over, wrists still bound.

Pecos dropped the loop over Antonio's thick mop of hair, jerked it tight around his neck. In the background, the dark blotch of vaqueros sat their ponies, silently watching.

Gathering up the slack, Pecos latched onto the rope with both hands, dug in with his heels, and hauled. The prisoner's squat form left the ground, spun around in the air, legs threshing in the throes of strangulation.

The rope released and the contorted form plunked heavily down, sprawled limp, feebly writhing. Then Antonio began greedily sucking air into his heaving lungs. His gasping eased. Pecos grabbed the rope again, hauled him to his feet. Teetering, he stood hacking and choking as he fought for breath.

"Ask him if he remembers now," directed the Texan. "Or maybe he prefers to swing for keeps."

Andreo stepped close, questioning. He turned, "Antonio will lead us now."

The string of riders walked their ponies through a fissure in an eroding rock wall, stirring a choking fog of talus dust. In the lead rode the prisoner, a noose hanging loose around his neck. Andreo, tailing him, grasped the slack rope. Pecos eased his pony along beside the segundo, nerves taut, braced for a trap or a slug from a lookout.

But the surprise seemed complete. When they emerged into the dim bowl of the canyon there was no sign of life beyond steers lumped over its flat floor and the glow of a distant campfire, dabbed dull-red against the gloom.

With upraised hand, Pecos halted the vaqueros as they filed out of the defile. Mentally, he cursed the language barrier. If ever men needed a pep talk, he reflected, these hombres did. From their uneasy glances around, he guessed they were scared, scared right through.

"Tell them," he said to Andreo, "to spread out and ride for that camp fire. At the first challenge, they sink in the guthooks and charge."

He sat watching the vaqueros pull away until their forms were swallowed by the shadows. "Let's go!" he said curtly to the segundo. Andreo shook the loose rope. Instantly, a

hoarse yell tore from the prisoner's throat and, at the same instant, his arms flung up, throwing off the noose. Dropping low, he spurred into the gloom. The roar of Pecos' .44 mingled with the echoes of the warning yell, rebounding from cliff to cliff.

Antonio's crouched form jerked spasmodically, rolled sideways out of the saddle. One spurred heel caught up in a stirrup. Spooked, the pony plunged wildly, every leap lifting the dragging form and smashing it down.

Pecos hurtled past him. There was no chance of surprise now. Antonio's yell and his gunshot had been a clear giveaway. He had to give the squat vaquero credit: he had guts. Likely he had worked his hands loose during the long ride to the canyon.

As the dun pounded ahead, Pecos glimpsed the dark forms of men running around the fire. Orange spurts of flame stabbed through the night. He held his own fire, but the guns of Barbed M hands, madly galloping over the canyon floor, spilled flame and thunder that crashed back and forth between the confining walls.

Waste of ammunition, he thought, but it sure sounded like an army was invading Leroux's hideaway. Bunches of terror-stricken steers, stampeding blindly back and forth, added to a scene of crazed confusion.

The gunfire from ahead seemed to have cut off. Pecos reached the fire, charged past it, crashed through brush. Rounding a squat adobe, he flushed a sombreroed form. The man whirled, fired, so close that the powderflash scorched the Texan's shirt. Pecos gunned him down and hurtled on. When he reached the fire again, excited vaqueros were charging in and out of the flickering circle of light. Guns blazing, they loosed lead wildly in all directions.

The rustlers had apparently vanished. Beyond the earlier shooting they had given no signs of their presence. His

own followers were a greater threat, throwing promiscuous lead.

Gradually, the confusion quieted. A quick tally failed to uncover any casualties. Then Pecos remembered the man he had downed behind the adobe. With Andreo, he broke through the brush, afoot. They stumbled over an outspread form, apparently lifeless, and packed it back to the camp fire. The lone prisoner wore vaquero garb. Life fast ebbed through a puckered bullet hole in his chest, but Pecos grasped a hairy wrist and found the pulse still strong.

The wounded man's eyes blinked open and his lips moved. Andreo dropped down on his heels beside him, listening to his muttered talk. Watching, Pecos made a smoke. The segundo straightened.

"He says," he told the Texan, "that Leroux is absent. If he had been here he would have killed us all. His companeros are cowards; they fled, leaving him to fight alone. But Leroux will be avenged."

XII

Carl Guttman showed no surprise when the resplendent Manuel Leroux jingled into the office at the sheep ranch, plunked a fat buckskin pouch down in front of him, carelessly brushed papers aside and dropped onto the end of the desk. The former caporal had plainly been riding hard. His velvet coat was dust-powdered, his dark pants trail-stained;

the buckskin tied outside, lean and sinewy as its owner, was jaded and footsore.

Seated at the desk, Guttman continued to figure. It was obvious that the two were on familiar terms.

Leroux brought out his tobacco flask, a package of corn husks and flint-and-steel. Adroitly, he tapped a little tobacco into a husk, twirled the ends to secure it, struck light and puffed with evident enjoyment. His thin lips curled with amusement as Guttman frowned at the stench of the rank tobacco smoke and eased his swivel chair further away.

"So you're back!" commented the sheepman brusquely. "Any trouble?"

The mestizo waved his cigaritto airily. "Trouble! Manuel Leroux laughs at trouble. The Barbed M's fat steers always find eager buyers at San Camino. No, señor, there was no trouble. We drove 460 head—there is $2,300 gold in the pouch, one-half of the purchase price. Easy money—for a sheepman!

There was a touch of contempt in his tone that brought a quick frown to Guttman's forehead. "Easy money!" he grated. "Who organized the operation? Who furnished the buyers? Who set you up in business when Mackenzie was crippled?" He scowled. "You get too big for your boots, Leroux, and I'll bust you just like I'm busting the Barbed M. You ready for another drive?"

Leroux sucked his cigaritto, eyeing the sheepman reflectively. "I am weary of taking orders, like a peon," said the mestizo.

Guttman leaned back in his chair, blue eyes weighing the other's smooth, swarthy features. "So you crave to quit?" he inquired.

"I crave to take over the Barbed M."

"You loco?"

"Maybe I have been loco," returned Leroux thinly. "I rustle for you, I do the work, I take the risk, I give you

half of every peso I make. That is surely loco." He jerked to his feet, began restlessly pacing. "It is finished!"

Guttman raised his broad shoulders, square features unmoved. "Have it your own way," he returned carelessly. "Quit! I'll find another hombre to handle the operation."

"Where?" challenged Leroux. "Men fear me in Poroso Valley; they will follow no other. Bring in a stranger." He drew a hand across his throat. "The coyotes will pick his bones."

The sheepman eyed him with cool speculation, knowing well the truth of the claim. The mestizo held the whip-hand, and knew it.

"Just how would you figure to take over the Barbed M?" he inquired guardedly.

Leroux spread his hands. "It is simple! You hold the note for $25,000. I buy the note. I demand payment. I foreclose. The ranch is mine."

"That note's worth $100,000," grunted Guttman. "It carries interest at 8%. I gamble it tops $100,000. You got $100,000?"

The mestizo smiled. "You joke, señor. True, I am not a poor man. The Saints have smiled at the monte tables and Barbed M beef brings many pesos. I can pay $25,000, no more."

"Like hell you can!" taunted Guttman. "And you think I'd sell if you could?" His tone smoothed out. "Forget this crazy notion. We've got a sweet setup. It's making you rich. Keep moving the cows out and you'll be in shape to buy most any ranch in the Territory."

"I want only the Barbed M," returned Leroux sullenly. He recovered his aplomb, bowed mockingly. "Adios, Señor Guttman. From now on Manuel Leroux rustles only for himself."

Frowning, the sheepman watched the lithe, dandified form of the mestizo as he strutted through the doorway and head-

ed for his pony. The bustard had him up a tree, he reflected. The Mackenzies must still own five-six thousand head—$50-$60,000 worth of beef at Border prices. Leroux would pocket that money. Quickly he made his decision and yelled out as Leroux stepped into the saddle.

The mestizo's head pivoted. Guttman beckoned. Triumph gleaming in his dark eyes, Leroux swung down again, ground-hitched the buckskin, stalked back into the office.

"Here's my deal, take it or leave it," barked Guttman. "I'll assign the note for—nothing. I take the stock."

"For nothing!" mocked Leroux. "You pocket $60,000 from the cows."

"You own a $100,000 spread."

The mestizo stood pulling thoughtfully at his under lip, then his dark features creased with satisfaction. "It is a deal, señor," he declared.

"No more rustling!" cautioned the sheepman. "That's my beef."

"Would I rob my partner?" reproved Leroux. "And my very good fren'?"

In the hidden canyon, the vaqueros heaped brush on the fire and squatted around it, smoking their cigarittos and volubly discussing the brief fracas. Pecos took a pasear through the chaparral and found no further sign of rustlers. He posted lookouts, rolled up in his slicker and stretched out to snatch a little sleep.

When dawn dissolved the shadows the canyon presented a scene of peace and quiet. Steers browsed contentedly, birds chittered in the brush, ravens squawked on the flat roof of the adobe. Around, rugged cliffs walled them in.

Dust began to drift as the vaqueros pushed the long-horns up canyon. Rumbling protest, the steers funneled through the cut, spilling out into the desolation beyond. Chowsed by yelling riders, they began to wind westward,

a long serpentine column threading through the chaos of hills back to the valley.

Riding ahead of the herd, Pecos pondered on the raid. It was the first setback Leroux had suffered, but that didn't mean that the elusive mestizo was checkmated. He'd find another hideaway, rustle more stock. Likely the bulk of the steers blowing behind him would be hazed back into the hills before the week was out. It seemed that the Mackenzies were playing a losing hand. The smartest play Dolores could make would be to sell out, and get out.

Then he remembered the $25,000 note. Who would buy a spread cumbered by an old note, swollen by many years of unpaid interest? Guttman had a stranglehold on the Barbed M. Dolores was sure in a heck of a bind.

It was midmorning before the slow-moving herd wound down the flanks of the hills into the valley. There was nothing the Texan could do but scatter them, hoping that the Leroux outfit wouldn't gather them up again. The dusty band of riders headed back to the ranch.

"Jesu Cristo!" ejaculated the segundo, as they rode into the yard. "El Diablo himself!"

With frowning disbelief, Pecos followed the direction of his glance. Seated on the gallery were Dolores and Manuel Leroux.

"Tend to my pony!" directed the Texan shortly. Stepping down, he eased his holster forward a mite and strode onto the gallery.

The girl sat straightbacked and tight-lipped. A smile, as always, clothed Leroux's features. At sight of Pecos he hastily raised both arms shoulder high, a quick uneasiness in his eyes. "I come in peace, señor," he called. "I carry no arms."

The Texan eased closer, wary as a cougar.

"You have ridden far, señor?" inquired the mestizo solicitously.

"Yep!" threw back Pecos. "We been busy raiding your hideaway. Guess you must have collected four-five hundred head of Barbed M stock."

If the news was a shock to Leroux he gave no sign of the fact. He chuckled, caressing his wisp of moustache. "Hideaway, señor? You joke. I have just returned from a trip to San Camino, where I spent many days. Manuel Leroux is an honest man, but"—he shrugged—"he shoulders the blame for many misdeeds. A vaquero is knifed in your bunkhouse—Leroux is a killer. You lose steers—Leroux is a rustler. You fight this gang—Leroux must lead them." He spread his hands. "Lies, all lies!"

"I'd take a dying man's word afore your's," bit back Pecos. "One of your boys stopped a bullet and he swore you ramrodded the whole shebang. I'd say you got the gall of an elephant, and the guts of a louse. I'm naming you a goddamned liar."

Rage flickered in Leroux's eyes, and died. He exposed white teeth in a broad smile.

"Carl has assigned the $25,000 note to him," put in Dolores stonily. "He claims he bought it. He called to collect."

So Guttman and Leroux were working in cahoots. Pecos had suspected it right along. What was behind this new play?

"Lemme lamp this note!" he demanded.

Leroux hesitated, then dipped into a pocket of his velvet coat, brought out a folded sheet. The paper crackled as he spread it. Pecos picked it up, glanced through it, held it up to the sun. "A pretty watermark," he commented, and tossed it back.

"It seems in order and has been duly assigned," put in the girl drearily. "I suppose we can raise $25,000."

"Pardon, señorita," explained Leroux silkily, "I lack the learning to figure exactly, but the sum is nearer $100,000."

Pecos whistled softly.

"This note," continued the mestizo smoothly, "was made many years ago, almost twenty. The interest it pays is 8%. You must now owe more, much more, even then $100,000." He raised his shoulders. "I am a generous man. I will settle for the ranch and the stock."

"Generous!" snapped Dolores. "Twelve square miles of land, with improvements, and six thousand head of stock. The ranch would be cheap at $150,000. But where," she added hopelessly, "would I find a buyer?"

"Not in New Mexico Territory," said Pecos. "There jest ain't that much dinero around. Guess this sidewinder's got you thrown and hog-tied."

"Your lamented father will sign a deed?" persisted Leroux, eyeing the girl expectantly.

"He has denied that he ever signed such a note."

"Does he deny his own signature?"

"Father is in no condition to argue."

"Then the courts must decide!" The mestizo rose. He paused. "I am your good fren'. I will make a gift of $5,000 for the deed. Better you should have the dinero than the buzzards who argue the law."

"Return within one week," the girl told him tautly. "I will be ready."

She jumped to her feet and ran into the house. Pecos saw that she was near tears with worry and vexation. He eyed the mestizo with cold anger. "When you come back," he fumed, "pack a gun. I crave to see if you bleed yeller."

Eyes dagger points, but lips locked, Leroux strode toward his pony.

The Texan was about to turn away when he saw Dolores standing in the doorway. She gestured. When he stepped close, she indicated Leroux, now cantering out of the yard.

"That dog rides to report to Carl, his master." Her voice was as brittle as thin glass.

"So?"

"It is a lonely trail to the sheep ranch."

He frowned, grasping her intent.

"You carried that mongrel, Yuma Pete, back to Carl across his horse," she continued. "It is more fitting than the coyotes pick Leroux's bones."

"So you crave I should beef the hombre?"

"And bring me the note."

"Nope, ma'am!" His tone admitted of no argument. "Leroux is naked, so to speak. I'm no lousy bushwhacker."

"Fool!" she flashed, and whirled into the house.

XIII

AFTER THE CLASH with Dolores, Pecos was in a mood to quit. But he had a paycheck to collect and his boss had vanished. The following morning, Andreo told him that she had left for Santa Fe, with a vaquero escort, before sunup. He guessed that she had gone to consult a lawyer in a last desperate effort to save the Barbed M.

The girl should have paid him off before she left, he reflected moodily as he hunkered on the gallery, killing time. Leroux, or more likely, Guttman, was due to take over the ranch. Since the stock would go with it, rustling operations had likely ceased. There would be no point for those two lobos to steal what they would shortly own. There was now no need for him to stick around. He felt as useless as a fifth wheel on the wagon.

It was too bad about the Mackenzie girl. She'd played a

losing hand from the start. With her father no more than a helpless hulk and that note hanging over her head, she'd never had a show. Guttman was a flint-hearted Shylock, but he had the law on his side. Leroux was as crooked as a snake in a cactus patch. The Texan's lips tightened. He'd give his saddle to match cutters with the sidewinder.

So the Mexican swore that his hands were clean and he'd been down in San Camino. Just what had taken the coyote down there? He'd heard of San Camino, a Mexican pueblo located south of the Rio Grande. Along the border it held an unsavory reputation. Men claimed plenty of wet stock changed hands in that neighborhood. If a man craved to pick up some cheap beef and wasn't particular about a brand or bill of sale, San Camino was the place to head for. For no good reason, except that he was sick of setting around, the Texan determined to take a look at San Camino.

At sundown the following day he steered his trail-weary dun through the saltbrush down to the bank of the broad, turgid Rio. Beyond lay Mexico. He splashed into the tranquil waters.

Thick chaparral marked its winding course and beyond lay sun-baked hills, rolling into distance.

Threading through gray-green brush, he jogged past crumbling adobes, emerging upon a trash-littered plaza. He checked his mount and sat looking around with rising disgust. A handful of yellow adobes dumped around the dusty plaza, San Camino drowsed as the shadows lengthened. This poverty-stricken hole stank like a dungheap and was no more attractive to the eye. Razor-back hogs routed among the garbage, scrawny hens scratched and clucked around the adobes, naked buttons tumbled in the dust. Straw-hatted peons in dirty white cotton trousers and spreading straw hats lay around in indolent ease. Their dull-eyed women, hair bedraggled and breasts sagging beneath loose camisas, labored listlessly beneath brush ramadas. The plaza was

deserted except for a wandering cur that paused to scratch its mangy hide.

The dump was as dead as last year's calendar, concluded the Texan. He should have saved himself the ride.

Then his questing gaze fell on the paint-peeling sign of a cantina. Outside, ponies drooped at the hitchrail. He was hot, dusty, and dry. Raising his reins, he drifted across to the cantina.

Tying the pony, he paused to beat the dust from his hat against a pant leg, and stepped through the doorway of the cantina. Inside, he paused to allow his eyes to adjust to the subdued light after the sunglare of the trail.

As the scene clarified, he focused on a low-ceilinged room, rude tables dotting the butt-littered dirt floor. In the rear, behind a blank bar, a fleshy Mexican lumped in a dilapidated armchair, head nodding, apparently asleep. His grimy shirt, unbuttoned, revealed a barrel chest thick with tangled black hair through which the sweat glistened, trickling down to a bulging paunch. Bottles were shelved behind him and a door stood ajar.

Flies blackened the ceiling and droned around swarthy vaqueros slacked at tables, cigarittos stuck between their thick lips, lazily sipping drinks. The air was redolent with the stench of stale vino.

Then he saw two caballeros seated at a side table with a bottle of tequilla. Their wide sombreros were banded with gold braid, their jackets gay with embroidery, their tight-fitting pantaloons lace-trimmed and fringed with tinkling conchas. Huge silver rowels projected from their riding boots. They were as much out of place as peacocks in a barnyard. He noticed, too, that they alone of the patrons paid him attention. Their scrutinizing eyes had followed every move since he entered.

He crossed the floor and rapped on the plank bar with

his knuckles. The barrel of fat in the armchair blinked awake, wheezed to his feet.

Tequilla, Pecos knew from experience, was liquid fire; border whisky was dynamite; but Mexican beer, even though lukewarm, always tasted good.

"Bottle of beer!" he said, and dropped a silver dollar on the bar.

"The señor is a stranger," commented the barkeep in high-pitched, reedy tones. He plunked a bottle before Pecos, swept the dollar into a pudgy palm, dropped several silver reals beside the bottle.

Pecos pushed the change back, took a long and satisfying pull at the bottle and set it down.

"You speak English," he commented.

"Si, señor. I tend the bar at Yuma—there are many Americanos in Yuma." The fat man pocketed the coins with alacrity. "The señor visits San Camino on business?"

"Kind of," admitted the Texan. "I'm looking for Manuel Leroux. You acquainted with the hombre?"

Recognition sparked in the barkeep's eyes, then, like a shutter, caution closed down. "Leroux!" he repeated, gaze blank. "No, señor, I do not know this Leroux."

"Too bad," murmured Pecos. He dipped into a pocket and brought out a double-eagle, slid it across the bar. "Maybe this will kinda jog your memory."

The fat man scooped up the gold piece. "Why would you wish to meet this Leroux?" he inquired.

"Figured maybe I could pick up a few steers," returned the Texan blandly. If this fat hog knew nothing, the remark would mean nothing; but if Leroux was peddling wet stock he was likely wise. There was little that didn't reach the ears of a barkeep in a small town, north or south of the Border.

"You have dealt with Leroux before?" inquired the barkeep, his tone guarded.

"Nope," confessed Pecos. "I was jest tipped off he had good stuff, at the right price." He saw the other's gaze stray to the side table, where the two caballeros dallied with their bottle. "Guess I ain't the only jasper hunting Leroux?"

The barkeep nodded slowly, triple chins wobbling. "They wish to dicker, too. The man you seek should be here before nightfall."

"Mucho gracias!" smiled Pecos. "I'll stick around."

He carried his part-empty bottle to a table on the far side of the cantina, scraped up a chair and sat down. So Leroux was expected, he mused; likely to settle some unfinished business with the two hombres sitting against the opposite wall. Lady Luck was sure dealing him aces.

So San Camino was the drain through which Barbed M stock had been siphoned off. If he'd wised up before he might have been able to do something about it. It was too late to block the drain now, but it sure wasn't too late for an accounting with Leroux. His forehead creased at a thought. The barkeep had said that the two caballeros had come to dicker. Now that he was about to take over the ranch, the ex-caporal sure wouldn't drive stock across the Rio to sell at cut rates, not when he could get the full market price in U.S. territory. Puzzled, the Texan nursed his bottle and waited.

Shadows fingered long across the bare stretch of the plaza when the distant rumbling bellow of cattle reached his ears. The sound increased in volume, drew closer. He saw the two caballeros rise, jingle to the doorway and stand looking out.

From where he sat, a square glassless window framed the plaza. He quickened with interest as dust fogged. A column of blowing steers came into view, herded by yelling vaqueros. He crossed to the window, eyed a stream of steers, red-eyed, dust-coated, pouring across the plaza, horns clacking. His glance flicked from beast to beast—every one car-

ried the Barbed M stamp brand. Then he glimpsed Leroux, riding beside the herd. Slackjawed with amazement, the Texan stood watching until the drag disappeared from view behind rolling dust.

Brow creased, he went back to his table. The two caballeros, buyers he guessed, had already returned to theirs. Leroux rustling his own cows! It didn't make good sense, but he couldn't discount the evidence of his eyes.

The portly bartender lit an oil lamp and set it on a shelf. Then he waddled out from behind the bar, hauled a chair beneath another lamp dangling from a viga in the center of the room, touched light to the wick.

As the interior of the cantina darkened with the setting of the sun, the two lamps made yellow pools of light which left patrons sitting near the sidewalls in semi-darkness. The room took on the appearance of a cavern, peopled with quivering shadows.

Leroux's lean form was outlined in the doorway. The Texan hunched lower, gambling that in the dim light he would pass unrecognized. From the corner of an eye he saw the ex-caporal pause, dart a quick glance around the cantina, then approach the caballeros with quick strides. Patrons had been drifting in and out. Now there were four vaqueros slapping cards at a table below the center lamp. Several more slouched on chairs and two were drinking at the bar.

Between the heads of the card players, Pecos watched Leroux sink down at the table opposite the two caballeros, raise an arm and signal to the barkeep. The fat man selected a bottle from the shelf behind him, rounded the end of the bar and wobbled across to the table. Then the Texan tensed at sound of the apron's high-pitched voice, a plump finger pointed in his direction, "An Americano seeks you, señor," he told Leroux.

Pecos snatched out his gun and jerked to his feet. The

four card players blocked his line of sight. As he jumped to one side, to clear them, a gunflash lit the cantina. The lamp suspended over the card players' heads blinked out amid a tinkle of glass. The cantina was plunged into darkness now, except for a halo of light around the bar. Gun raised, Pecos sought sight of his quarry. Chairs scraped and bodies thudded as patrons flattened on the floor. Again a gun spilled flash and thunder. With a jangle of metal the lamp behind the bar clattered down. The powder flash revealed nothing but the forms of prone men.

Fumbling around tables, Pecos moved toward the blurred outline of the doorway, eager to cut off the mestizo's retreat.

Confident that no one had eased out, he crouched beside it, the hammer of his .44 thumbed back. The cantina was a black chasm of darkness, pricked here and there by the glowing stub of a discarded cigaritto. There was no sound save the labored breathing of men sprawled over the floor and the steady drip, drip, drip of oil from the smashed center lamp.

A door slammed in the rear of the room and in the tensed quiet it seemed to crash like a thunderclap. Too late, Pecos remembered the door behind the bar. Could be, he thought hopefully, it was the barkeep ducking out. He was nailed down. If he moved away from the front doorway, Leroux might slip out; if he struck a light he made a clear target and Leroux had proved himself no slouch with a gun.

As he crouched in the darkness, the clatter of hooves outside reached his ears. He jumped for the doorway. Vague in the dying light, he saw a rider pulling away from the hitchrail. With a brisk tattoo of hooves, the pony streaked across the plaza. He glimpsed a red sash and all doubt was dispelled. Leroux had tricked him. The fast-thinking Mexican, after shooting out the lights, had slid through the rear doorway, quietly loosed his pony and made a getaway.

Pecos ran for his own mount, but by the time he was in the saddle, the fleeing rider had vanished. With disgust, he headed for the river. It was a sure thing he wouldn't locate Leroux now. There was nothing he could do but head back to the ranch. And try to figure out why the wily mestizo was still peddling rustled Barbed M steers in San Camino.

XIV

TWO DAYS LATER, Dolores returned from Santa Fe. She seemed transformed. Before she left, the girl had been unsmiling, preoccupied, burdened by a load of trouble. Now she glowed with animation. Throwing the Texan a bright smile, she slipped out of her sidesaddle. Something both unexpected and pleasing must have occurred in Santa Fe, he surmised. Fatigued by the journey, the girl headed for her room, so no chance was offered Pecos to satisfy his curiosity.

Guttman and Leroux rode in. He sauntered over as the two peeled out of leather by the water trough. The mestizo, he noted, had again shucked his gunbelt.

"Quite a slew of Barbed M steers you pushed over the Rio a few days back," he commented.

"I do not understand such loco talk," returned Leroux shortly.

"You got a convenient memory," threw back the Texan.

"Maybe you forgot, too, how I chased you out of San Camino."

"What's that about cows?" demanded Guttman. The stocky cowman's hard eyes questioned Pecos.

"It's jest that I can't figure why this hairpin would rob himself," drawled Pecos. "Heck, ain't he taking the spread over—and the stock?"

"I take the stock!" barked Guttman. His pale eyes shifted, held the mestizo. "You been cutting out my cows, Manuel?"

"Madre del Diablo, no!" snapped Leroux. "The gringo lies. He is sly, like the coyote. He seeks to make trouble between us."

"So you been rustling Guttman's stock," chuckled Pecos. "It makes sense. Guess you'd doublecross your own mother."

The Mexican bent to slacken a girth, lips locked. Guttman stood scowling uncertainly. Then Dolores came out of the house.

The men moved across the yard.

"What brought you, Carl?" inquired the girl with surprise. "I thought Leroux owned the note." Her demeanor puzzled Pecos. Rightly, she should have been downcast at the prospect of losing the ranch. But she seemed jubilant. The Texan had never seen her in such a lighthearted mood. Leroux, he noted, didn't savvy the girl's attitude either. The mestizo was puzzled, his suspicious glance sliding from one to the other.

"I've got a dicker with Leroux, after he takes over," explained the sheepman, and dropped onto a chair. "You have your lawyer fix up that deed?"

"Let's all sit down," smiled Dolores. "There's so much to discuss."

"There's nothing to discuss," barked Guttman. "You got the deed?"

"For what?" inquired the girl coolly. "A forged note?"

Pecos, lounging against an upright, thumbs hooked in his

gunbelt, tautened with startled surprise. Just what kind of a blazer was the Mackenzie girl trying to run?

The sheepman sat immovable, square features rigid, blue eyes wide with shocked surprise. Leroux fidgeted in his rocker, uneasy glance swiveling between the sheepman and the girl.

Guttman broke a tight silence. "You plumb crazy?" he blustered.

"I'm neither crazy nor a crook, Carl Guttman." Dolores' tone was edged with cold anger. "My lawyer searched the archives. The note has never been recorded."

"Which means nothing," barked Guttman, rapidly recovering his aplomb. "Mexico owned this Territory when that note was made, and the dons did a sloppy job with records. Then there's been two revolutions, an invasion. Records have been looted and destroyed. Hell, that note's signed, dated and witnessed. It'll stand up in any court."

"It might," agreed Dolores, with a disdainful smile, "if the paper upon which it is written had been available twenty years ago. You did a good job of forging, my dear brother-in-law, but you used paper that was not made even six years back."

"Diablo!" ejaculated Leroux, who had followed the dialogue with tensed concentration. "How could any man swear to the age of a sheet of paper?"

"The watermark!" purred the girl. "You should know that paper is branded, like a cow. You will remember that when Pecos examined the note he held it to the sun. There was a beautiful watermark—two crossed quills. And the mill that made that paper has only been in operation six years." Her mocking eyes held Guttman. "Now will you take the case to court, Carl?"

Jaw clamped hard, he glared at her, saying nothing.

"Were it not for Juanita and the child," she added bit-

terly, "I would have sworn out a warrant for your arrest—picaro!"

Leroux yanked the note from a pocket. Fingers trembling with agitation, he unfolded the sheet, held it to the light. "It is so!" he muttered, and swung to face Guttman, his features a mask of fury. "Ladrón! Malente! Pervertir!" he snarled. "You not only use Manuel Leroux but you trick him!"

He leaped to his feet. A long knife flashed out of the sheath by his side. Dolores screamed. Guttman's chair crashed over as he straightened, fumbling at his holster. Pecos, standing in the rear of the enraged mestizo, jerked his six-gun. The gun chopped down. Its steel barrel thudded flat on the crown of Leroux's sombrero. The ex-caporal collapsed in a limp heap. Pecos holstered his gun and kicked the knife away from Leroux's slack fingers.

The note had dropped and lay unheeded. A vagrant breeze rustled it across the floor of the gallery. Dolores reached, picked it up. Casually she tore and re-tore it into tiny shreds, tossed them over a shoulder. The fragments showered like snowflakes.

Not a word had been spoken since Leroux dropped like a pole-axed steer. Three pairs of eyes watched the tiny pieces of paper float to the ground. Then Guttman abruptly swung away and plugged toward his pony.

Pecos dropped into Leroux's vacated rocker and lifted the makings from a shirt pocket. "Wal," he commented, "this has been a surprising day."

"A day I'll never forget," returned Dolores fervently. "I knew Carl was unscrupulous but I never dreamed he could be so—crooked." Contemptuously, she added, "His soul will burn in Hell."

"Mebbe he'll have company," returned Pecos, eyeing Leroux's slack form, sprawled almost at their feet. "Mebbe I slugged the lobo a mite too hard."

As though to dispute his words, the mestizo's limbs twitched; he groaned.

Guttman rode past, eyes straight ahead. "I wouldn't crave to wear that hombre's boots," continued the Texan thoughtfully. "Not with Leroux hell-bent to collect a payoff."

"Birds of a feather!" sniffed Dolores.

The mestizo levered to a sitting position, staring around with bemused eyes. His glance fell on the knife. He reached, grasped it and thrust it awkwardly back into his sheath. "Where is Guttman?" he mumbled.

"The hombre beat it," supplied Pecos, watching him closely.

Leroux wavered to his feet and stood swaying, apparently still in a haze. He stumbled off the gallery and began weaving toward the water trough.

Pecos carefully made a cigarette, eyeing Dolores thoughtfully.

"Is something troubling you, señor?" she inquired, with a sleepy smile.

"Yep!" The Texan struck a stinker, held it to his smoke. "It was sure slick of you tracing the watermark, but I jest can't figure how you turned the trick. Reckon all the paper mills are located back east; there sure ain't none around the Territory. Takes a caravan forty days to reach the Missouri River, and that's only part way. How in creation did you pin down that watermark in less than a week?"

"Can you keep a secret?" Amusement danced in her dark eyes.

"Guess so."

"I didn't!"

Puzzled, he eyed her. "Wal, who did?"

"No one," she confessed carelessly. "It was—what you call it—a bluff. The thought came as I rode to Santa Fe."

"So you were spilling windies?" he exclaimed incredulously.

"I knew the note was false," she explained blandly. "But I could not prove it. My father has a horror of debt. He bought with hard money as he called it, and he sold for hard money. As long as I can remember, he was never short of money. Why, then, would he borrow from Guttman, a man he detested? Through the years there has been no mention, no thought of such a debt. Yet a month after father was stricken, Carl presents the note, demanding payment."

The Texan chuckled. "So Guttman bluffed you with a forged note and you called his hand. I'd sure hate to buck you in a poker game."

"You prefer me as a partner, eh?" she challenged. Then, apparently at a thought, she lapsed into frowning silence.

Just what did she mean by that crack, wondered Pecos. It was hard to figure this girl. One moment she was playful as a kitten, the next prickly as a porcupine.

"Wal, what's itching you now?" His voice held a touch of irritation.

"Juanita—Carl's wife, my sister."

"So?"

"Carl was in a black mood when he left. He beats Juanita when he is angry."

That was sure no lie, considered Pecos, remembering the welts on the woman's back. Aloud, he said, "You figure she's due for a walloping?"

The girl nodded, features somber. "I fear for her life. Carl is terrible when enraged."

"You asking me to ride over and take a hand?"

"There is no one else to save her! Pecos, bring her back to the Barbed M!"

"And I was all set to quit," he said, knowing that he could not resist the appeal in her dark eyes.

Again he followed the wagon road that snaked through the Solano Hills. Now that he was alone and free of the witchery of the girl, the Texan wryly decided that he was an

all-fired knothead. No stranger had any license to interfere between a husband and his wife. He was loco to bust into another man's domestic affairs on the strength of a girl's whim. He couldn't brace Guttman, asking "You been beating your wife?" The sheepman would likely tell him to go get his head examined. And if he got rambunctious, that bunch of sheepherders Guttman kept around were likely to slice him up like a prime roast. They had a killing chalked against him and there was never any love lost between cattlemen and sheepmen.

He checked the dun, regretting his impetuousity. Then he remembered the whip marks scarring the smooth curve of Juanita's bare back—and rode on.

The whitewashed adobes of the sheep ranch bore the same appearance of bleak orderliness as he neared them, but there didn't seem to be anyone around. He passed the house. Ahead, outside the little adobe office, dark featured peons were milling around the long window and doorway. Dismounting, the Texan elbowed through a gesticulating, yammering throng, threw open the closed door—and saw Carl Guttman lying on the floor.

The sheepman's square features were bloodless, his eyes veiled by closed lids. He had been stripped to the waist. A linen bandage swathed his blocky torso. Blood had soaked through, blotching the white linen with rustlike stains. By the rear wall huddled his wife, only her dark eyes visible through the black rebozo that was draped over head and shoulder. Dusky faces crowded the latticed window.

Pecos stepped up to the woman, laid a reassuring hand upon her back. She flinched. "Guttman was beating you," he prompted, "and you knifed the coyote?"

Juanita shook her head. "It was not so, señor." Her voice was flat, emotionless. "True, he beat me in the house. I lay, imploring mercy while he lashed me with that cruel quirt. He was like a madman. Then this Leroux stormed

in. He, too, was in a fury. They wrangled, each accusing the other of misdeeds. They left. Leroux dashed past on his horse. The peons began shouting. I hurried out. The peons are gathered around the office. I find Carl, stretched in a pool of blood. I do my poor best to succor him."

"I'd say the jasper won't make any more trouble," said Pecos, nodding at the slack form.

The woman dropped to her knees, fingered a limp wrist. "His pulse is strong," she asserted. "He is a man of great vitality. He will live. Soon the medico will arrive from San Selma."

"Guess you've done all you could," the Texan told her. He was not greatly concerned whether Guttman lived or died. "Dolores says for you to come back with me to the Barbed M, and bring the button."

"Carl may need me!" she protested.

"Heck, ma'am," protested Pecos. "The bustard tried to run a blazer over your sister, he beats the daylights outa you. You owe him nothing."

"He is my husband," she said simply.

The Texan shook his head, battling perplexity. Last time he was around, she craved the jasper killed. Now she was deadset to save his life. He just didn't savvy these Mackenzie women.

XV

THERE WASN'T much point in sticking around, Pecos decided. It was plain that Juanita wouldn't budge. She'd sent a peon

to bring the doctor. He pulled out, heading back to the Barbed M.

Manuel Leroux was a fugitive now, he reflected, as the dun jogged along the meandering trail. Likely the lobo had hightailed for Mexico. If Guttman checked out, he'd be dodging a murder warrant.

The sun had circled high when his mount drummed across the brushy bench that overlooked Poroso Valley. He hit the downgrade. Eroding walls closed in and the trail threaded between rocky outcrops.

Too late he heard the soft hiss of a whirling lariat. The loop dropped over his head and shoulders, jerked tight, pinioning his arms before he could make a move to throw it off. Hauled out of the saddle, he hit the rock-etched trail with a flat thud that seemed to loosen every joint in his body. For moments he lay half-stunned, breathless and bewildered. Blinking up into sunglare, the rawhide rope biting into his arms, he saw Leroux moving towards him, features creased into a triumphant grin, gathering in the slack of the rope as he advanced. The mestizo must have lamped him heading for Guttman's place. Guessing that he'd ride back to the valley, Leroux had lain in ambush. And he'd ridden into the trap as unsuspecting as a dumb steer wading into quicksand.

Leroux paused a few paces from the Texan's recumbent form, leaning on the rope. "You do not bray so loudly now, señor," he taunted, eyes glittering. "Soon you will not bray at all, for I shall slit your throat."

Pecos thought fast. This seemed to be one jackpot he'd never wriggle out of. "Why beef me?" he protested, playing for time. "Guttman flimflamed you. I'm paid to do a job."

"That picaro will never cheat again," declared the mestizo tightly. "And you, señor, will never again buzz around Manuel Leroux like a hornet." His tone thickened with venom. "You drive me off the Barbed M, you spy on me in

San Camino, you almost crack my skull with the six-gun. Now I pay my debts." Sunlight flashed on the blade of his knife as he slid it from the leather sheath.

He hauled cautiously, closer on the taut rope. Eyes slitted against the sun, the Texan lay on his back, helplessly trussed, watching the mestizo's contorted features. He groped desperately for his holster with the fingers of his right hand. Leroux laughed. A quick sideways glance revealed the reason. When he had been wrenched headlong out of the saddle, the six-gun had slipped out of the holster and lay, half-buried in dust, beyond his reach.

He brought back his knees, braced to launch a kick when the mestizo came within reach, but Leroux was taking no chances. Careful to keep his weight on the rope, he circled and came up behind his prisoner. Head tilted back, Pecos followed every movement. Thin lips tight pressed, the other edged closer, hauling up, hand over hand, on the rope.

A thrown steer is helpless as long as the cow pony maintains a steady pull on the rope dallied around the saddlehorn. Slacken, and the animal is on its feet in a flash. Remembering this, Leroux thought only of the rope.

Mentally cursing the sun rays lancing into his eyes and almost blinding him, Pecos, flat on his back, watched the mestizo ease closer, closer, poised ready to pounce and slash his throat.

Every muscle braced, the Texan suddenly flip-flapped backward. His legs, locked together, swung over his head and slammed like a flail against the crouching Leroux's chest. Taken by surprise, the other staggered before the impact. The rope slackened.

Pecos jerked his arms free of the confining loop and was on his feet in a blue of motion, diving for his gun. But Leroux still held the rope. Throwing himself back on his heels, he hauled. The loop tightened again around the Texan's body, almost jerking him off his feet. It slackened

as he jumped for the mestizo. Leroux dropped the rope, turned to flee. Pecos pivoted and again jumped for his gun. He scooped up the weapon, swung around, thumbing back the hammer. But there was no sign of his quarry. Sound of running feet and the jingle of spur chains reached his ears. He rushed to the bend of the twisting trail, but the fleeing Leroux was already hidden behind a rocky shoulder on the next turn of the trail. Panting, the Texan paused. The pounding of a pony's hooves reached his ears, rapidly receding.

Disgusted, he shook off the loop still hanging loose above his hips, and ran toward a rocky spur projecting above his head. The eroding sandstone, seamed with crevices, made easy climbing. He clambered up until his head was above the level of the surrounding outcrop. Below, the wagon road looped back and forth across rugged, sloping terrain. Dust boiled and Leroux came into view, his pony stretched out at full gallop as it rounded the loop. And in front of the fleeing mestizo raced the dun, stirrups swinging, tail streaming as Leroux drove it ahead.

Left afoot, the Texan climbed down and began gloomily legging down the trail. Every joint ached from that first crash to the ground, his head felt as though it was filled with molten lead, and thought of Leroux getting away with his saddlehorse irked worse than a sore tooth.

Footsore from tramping in high-heeled, glove-fitting riding boots, he found the dun quietly nuzzling tufts of grass at the bottom of the grade. His Winchester was missing from the boot. He gathered up the pony's dangling reins and swung into leather. The mestizo had sure made a horse's arse out of him, he reflected wryly, but maybe he shouldn't kick too hard. With less luck, the buzzards would have been feasting on his carcass.

Uneventful days slid by. The Barbed M seemed finally

to have sidetracked trouble. Leroux had vanished and was fast becoming little more than an unpleasant memory. Carl Guttman's submissive wife was nursing the sheepman back to health. Dolores was happily engrossed in managing the ranch. Under Andreo's supervision, the crew smoothly handled the daily chores.

There was just no reason why he should stick around any longer, the Texan told himself. But still he lingered and would have admitted to no one that he hated to cut loose because of Dolores.

Her dark eyes teased him, her lazy smiled mocked him, but she adroitly avoided further involvement.

Then misfortune again hit the Barbed M.

Pecos was hunkered in the shade of the bunkhouse, in no genial frame of mind. Finally convinced that the ravishing Dolores was an arrant flirt, dangling him on a string through sheer willfulness, he had just about decided to roll up his soogans and drift. Already he'd spent too much time setting around like a broody hen. He paid little attention when Andreo tornadoed into the yard, peeled out of leather and glanced quickly around. The segundo focused him and approached at a half-run. "Señor!" he called breathlessly. "A plague has struck us!"

"Plague?" Pecos came to his feet. "Just what kind of a plague?"

"If the señor will ride, I will show him."

Pecos cinched his saddle on the dun and they rode out together. Andreo headed southward. They jogged over the valley floor until the swales grew into rolling foothills, yellowed with greasewood blossom and veined by ravines in which wild grapes and hackberry grew in tangled profusion. Ahead, Pecos saw buzzards, floating low. More of the scavenger birds fluttered into the air as they approached the carcass of a steer.

Andreo dismounted, drew his knife and plunged the blade

into the bloated body. Foul-smelling, reddish pus oozed out. The segundo wiped his knife off on the hide, looked up. "I have never seen the like," he confessed. "You know this sickness?"

The Texan nodded. "Sure, blackleg."

"There are more, many more, stricken," the Mexican told him gloomily, and climbed back into the saddle.

Circling, they threaded through scores of swollen, stinking carcasses, thick specked over the range.

It was plain to Pecos that disaster threatened the Barbed M. Among animals, blackleg was more infectious than the pox among humans, and far more deadly. Once infected, an animal died. There was only one way to stamp out the disease—kill every steer that could possibly have become infected and bury the bodies in quicklime. Where stock roamed freely, as on the Barbed M, who could guess how far the infection had spread?

Pecos didn't break the bad news to Dolores until after supper. It was like telling an hombre that someone had stolen his horse and he was about to lose his pants.

Waiting until the girl had settled down on the gallery to enjoy the comparative coolness of the evening, he dropped into a rocker and announced tersely, "We've got blackleg!"

Dolores eyed him, forehead creased, "Blackleg! What is that?"

"A cattle disease. There's no cure and it spreads faster'n grease on a hot skillet. Right now carcasses of our cows are rotting all over the valley."

"You think our herds may be wiped out?" she demanded quickly.

The Texan raised his shoulders. "Maybe," he admitted. "I've only come up against the scourge once, but a man never forgets blackleg. It swept through the Pecos River country, beggered plenty of ranchers. Seems there's no stopping it once it gets started."

"We must do something!" she insisted.

"Ain't much we can do, except to try and weed out infected steers, kill 'em and bury every carcass."

"Where does this blackleg come from?"

Pecos raised his shoulders. "Contact with an infected animal, I guess."

"But our cows have no contact with other animals. In this valley they are cut off, secluded."

"I'm no cowman. I jest wouldn't know how it got here, but it's here."

"I know," she came back quickly. "Leroux!"

"The mestizo beat it weeks back. He's a fugitive, likely in Mexico."

"Who knows where that picaro lurks?" The girl's voice was tense with emotion. "Do you think he nurses anything but hatred for us? He craved the ranch and it was snatched from his grasping fingers. What he cannot possess, he is determined to destroy."

"Could be," agreed Pecos. "The hands have reported some strange brands. Someone planted 'em."

"Who but Leroux? He has escaped your gun, señor." Her tone chilled, "He will not escape me."

"Wal," he drawled, rising, "talking never killed anyone. I got to send a wagon to San Selma, señorita, for a load of quicklime."

Pecos took over again. He had the crew riding from dawn 'til dark, cutting out healthy steers to hold apart; combing the ravines and side hills for sick steers; disposing of infected stock.

Steers continued to drop all over the range. There was neither the time nor the manpower available to bury their festering remains. Lime-sprinkled carcasses were dumped into arroyos, stacked bank-high, hastily covered with earth, and left to rot. Daily, the herd of healthy steers bunched at the north end of the valley shrank as more and more

fell victims to the loathsome disease. Finally, when the last of the blackleg victims had been interred, only a pitiful remnant remained of the thousands recorded in the tally books.

The valley had become a graveyard, and the ranch showed little more life than a morgue. Worn-out by days of unceasing effort fighting the pestilence, vaqueros hunkered around the spread, morosely smoking cigarittos. They were not out working stock because there was scarcely any stock left to work. It would be loco to bring in fresh beef until they were satisfied that the disease had been completely eradicated. Just one sick steer, overlooked in a brushy gully, could start another devastating epidemic. Few ranchers could survive the loss the Barbed M had suffered. He wondered how the Mackenzies would make out.

The answer came quickly. On the evening of the day they buried the last diseased steer in quicklime, Dolores summoned him to the office.

He found her sitting at the desk, an account book open before her. She motioned him to a chair.

"It is finished!" she said, with calm fatalism.

"You mean—you're busted?"

The girl nodded. He saw she was close to tears.

XVI

"So YOU'RE QUITTING!" said Pecos, and fished out the makings. "Wal, you made a good fight."

"Did I say I was quitting?" challenged the girl.

"You got no option—no cows, no dinero."

"I still have land and buildings."

"All you need is stock," he returned dryly. "And stock calls for dinero—which don't grow on trees." He tapped tobacco into a paper and threw out, "Maybe that knife wound softened Guttman up. The hairpin could be repentent. Could be he'd come through with a loan."

"I'd die before I took one dollar from Carl," she returned vehemently.

He licked the paper, stuck the cigarette between his lips, and scraped a stinker, weighing the girl. He had to give her credit, she was spunky; but capital was just as essential as guts in running a cattle ranch. Nothing took the place of money, hard or folding.

Dolores sat, lips pursed, frowning at the account book. "I know where there is much gold," she announced abruptly.

"Yeah?"

"On the Arkansas River."

Pecos blinked, and repeated, with a touch of derision, "On the Arkansas River?"

"You do not know the story," she returned, with a faint smile at his bewilderment. "I will tell you." She toyed with a pencil, marshaling her thoughts, then began.

"For many years my father ran the Barbed M at a profit. We became wealthy. He was contemptuous of paper money; always he demanded gold or silver. His bank was a trunk he kept in his room. It was a large trunk, but it was more than half-full of gold and silver coins—Mexican pieces of eight, American eagles and double eagles, even Spanish doubloons. Last year, in the spring, he decided that his treasure should be moved to a safe place. He was getting old and perhaps he thought of returning to the land of his birth.

"The trunk was loaded on a wagon. With an escort of six armed vaqueros, my brother set out. His intent was to follow the Old Santa Fe Trail to Missouri. From there the

gold would be shipped to a bank vault in St. Louis. A month later, one vaquero, Gaspar, returned, and brought dire news. The party had been attacked by Comanches on the Jornado del Muerte. Five vaqueros were slain, but Gaspar and my brother escaped with the wagon. They reached the Arkansas River, but in crossing the wagon bogged down in quicksand. The savages were in hot pursuit. My brother told Gaspar to flee and save his own life. He eluded the Comanches and made his way back."

"So the Injuns got your brother and the gold?"

"No! I sent Andreo back to learn Jack's fate. He traveled with a caravan. Questing down the river, he obtained news of a wounded man who had staggered into a homestead outside Westport. They dressed his wounds but he died before morning.

"Your brother?"

Dolores nodded somberly. "Yes! Andreo brought back his wallet, gunbelt and boots."

"The Comanches grab the gold?"

"I do not think so." The girl smiled faintly. "My father is a shrewd man. There was nothing but rocks in the trunk. The dinero was concealed in a false bottom built into the wagon."

"You locate the wagon?"

"How could I? When Gaspar returned my father was lying like one dead. The Arkansas River is four hundred miles distant. They tell me the country is wild, infested with ravaging Indians.

"How about Andreo?"

"One man! No, señor, Andreo risked his life once. I could not ask it again. Leroux was now caporal. Would I trust that ladrón? He had already corrupted the crew; I knew not who was loyal. Carl? Only an imbecile would have faith in him. So I did nothing. But now I need the gold."

Her tone was honed with intensity. "Madre de Dios! How I need it!"

The Texan sucked his cigarette, musing on the amazing story. It was sure one for the book, he reflected. Odds were that young Jack Mackenzie never had a chance to cache the dinero, not with Comanches buzzing around. He had been lucky to escape with his scalp intact. Aloud, he said, "You forgot that Leroux was kingpin around here? The mestizo's slick. He likely knew what was in that wagon. Gaspar likely talked. I'd say that Leroux hightailed for the Arkansas and hunted that wagon."

"I do not think so, señor. The Arkansas River is twenty days journey beyond Santa Fe. Forty days traveling, ten days for the search. Leroux was never absent from the ranch for more than a few days. What is more, no one except Jack and I knew that the gold was not in the trunk."

Pecos shrugged. "So what! You figure that wagon's still stuck in the sands of the river--after a year! Heck, ma'am, I'd stake my saddle it's been washed downstream, or the Comanches burned it."

"I intend to prove you wrong," she said calmly.

He smiled. "Don't tell me you're heading for the Arkansas—alone! Heck, that's no trip for a woman. You'd have no more chance of pulling through than I've got of trimming the whiskers off the man in the moon."

"You could escort me!"

"Nope!" he threw back decisively. "You may be loco, but not me. I don't stomach Comanches."

"You are afraid?" Derision sparked the girl's eyes.

"Sure am!" the Texan admitted. "No sane man would sashay around that country with a woman—not if he figured keeping the hair on his head."

"Andreo and Gaspar will ride with us."

"Chasing a mirage!" he derided. "Count that dinero lost, ma'am, and count me out."

She tossed her head. "I shall go, if need be, alone."

"I wish you good luck—you'll sure need it," he replied ironically, and rose. "Guess we chewed this over long enough."

He sauntered outside onto the gallery. The stars flamed against the velvet bowl of night. From the bunkhouse floated the plaintive notes of a guitar. Faint with distance, a coyote pack howled a discordant accompaniment.

In no good humor, he hunkered against the rough adobe front of the house and made another cigarette.

Trust a woman to treasure crazy notions, he thought. He'd heard plenty about the Jornada del Muerte, sixty waterless miles of flat desert across which the caravans dragged en route to Santa Fe. A journey of death, marked by the remnants of looted wagons and the bleaching bones of dead men. That's where the Comanches had hit the Mackenzie party, just as they hit most every train that pulled across the waste. It was risky for the caravans, defended by well-armed teamsters; it would be suicide for three men and a girl. Even if they pulled through they'd never have a Chinaman's chance of locating that wagon, abandoned somewhere along the winding length of the Arkansas River. And that was assuming it was still intact. That girl needed her head examined. He wanted out.

The door of the ranchhouse opened. Dolores hurried across the yard. Smoking, he watched her return with Andreo and another vaquero. The three entered the house.

He had added several butts to the litter around him when he again heard the door open, slowly and softly. Turning his head, he saw Dolores standing on the threshold, vague in the gloom beneath the gallery canopy. Apparently glimpsing the glowing tip of his cigarette, she moved toward him. Her skirt rustled as she sank upon a chair nearby without speaking.

Pecos was conscious that his pulse was pounding. Dam-

mit, he thought irritably, he'd met painted beauties in saloons, pretty chiquitas in cantinas, buxom ranch girls; how come none had ever affected him like this disdainful señorita? He stirred restlessly, conscious of her curvaceous form, the breasts undulating beneath the loose camisa, the luminous scrutiny of her dark eyes.

"I said count me out," he snapped, with tight exasperation.

"You made it very plain, señor." Her voice held subtle mockery. "I yearned to enjoy the beauty of the night and, perhaps, your company."

"Good looking gals that play with fire are liable to get burned."

"He threatens!" she murmured. "What a brave men! So afraid of Comanches, so masterful with women!"

"Quit prodding! I jest don't swallow your loco notions."

"It is a desperate chance, but it is my one chance to save the Barbed M."

"Desperate!" He snorted. "It's plumb crazy."

"I gamble with the only card I have left. Andreo and Gaspar are willing to gamble, too—if you will lead them."

"You got better chance of finding hair on a frog."

"You are a gambler, too," she continued softly. "You stake your life on the speed of your six-gun. It is not the Indians you fear—perhaps you fear for me." With that, she impulsively swayed close. For a moment he thrilled to the quick impress of her soft lips against his mouth, then, before he could grasp her, the girl slipped away and ghosted into the house.

For awhile he remained hunkered, senses awhirl. To his left, lamplight spearing through the slit windows of the living room made bright bars across the gallery floor. At length he straightened and moved uncertainly down the gallery. Pausing at a window, he glanced inside. Dolores sat straightbacked in a chair, talking earnestly to Andreo and

the vaquero. There was no expression on the segundo's swarthy features, but the other, who he guessed as Gaspar, looked sullen.

He shrugged resignedly and stepped down to the door, pushed it back and entered. The heads of the three swiveled.

"Count me in!" he grunted.

XVII

NIGHT WAS FALLING when the little cavalcade clattered through the narrow streets of Santa Fe. Dolores and Pecos rode ahead, Andreo tailing them. Behind came Gaspar—the sole survivor of Jack Mackenze's ill-fated trip—herding three pack mules.

They headed for the Mackenzie's town house, threaded through the arched entrance into the courtyard, dismounted and tied their ponies. Marta, a wrinkled old Mexican woman who served as caretaker, welcomed Dolores with a flow of excited Spanish. Emilia, her daughter, hastened to bring wine.

Just as soon as he could ease away, Pecos headed for the Plaza afoot. It was little more than a stone's throw distant. There was nothing about this venture that he liked. He was convinced Mackenzie's gold was beyond their reach. Likely the wagon had long since been destroyed by man or the elements. In that event, they were wasting their time and risking their scalps to satisfy a girl's whim. Which didn't make sense.

Neither had he shown any sense in allowing Dolores to tole him into taking a hand, he thought glumly. But, seeing that he was committed to the trip and was regarded as leader, he had a yen to gather what information he could on what lay ahead.

The Old Santa Fe Trail was a closed book to him—he'd heard of the waterless Jornada del Muerte, ravening Comanches, quicksands, scurvy. There should be plenty of traders and teamsters in Santa Fe who could set him right on what to expect. Further, he needed to buy a Winchester to replace the rifle Leroux had made off with.

The ancient old Plaza, shadowed by the rambling Governor's Palace at one end and the great twin-towered church at the other, was thronged with the usual motley—ragged peons, silk-sashed cabelleros, rebozoed women, bearded teamsters, whining beggars—a restless sea of swirling humanity. The soft laughter of cigaritto smoking señoras mingled with the deep-voiced bandiage of men, the vagrant tinkle of guitars, the slap of zapatos and the shuffle of boots, all enveloped in a haze of hovering dust.

A newly-arrived wagon train ground across the square, axles screeching, whips cracking, and teamsters scorching the air with expletives. As he stood watching the lumbering Murphys creak past, each hauled by six span of gaunted oxen, shredded rawhide shoes upon their hooves, the Texan noted that the grayed canvas of many wagons bristled with the feathered hafts of arrows, the heads buried deep in the loads. Likely the teamsters had let them remain out of bravado, but it wasn't a pleasant omen.

The half-dozen or more saloons facing the Plaza pulsated with revelry. He elbowed into one and circulated around, buying a drink for a red-shirted teamster here and for a buckskin-clad trapper there, all the while prodding them with questions. It was near midnight when he headed back to the casa.

From what he'd learned, Indians lurked most all of the way to the Crossing of the Arkansas, and were stinging aplenty. Passage was hazardous for caravans and dynamite for small parties. Pawnees were raiding along the river; Comanches were on the rampage on the Jornada del Muerte; Kiowas were active on the Cimarron.

Allowing for the customary exaggerations, he decided that the Trail was no place for three men and a girl. Their only chance of getting through would be to tag along with a caravan returning to Missouri. The evening yielded one bright spot—he had picked up a Winchester in prime shape for twenty-five dollars from a puncher who'd lingered too long at the monte tables.

When he stepped through the archway into the courtyard, a shadow moved toward him. In instant reaction, he flicked out his .44, relaxing when Andreo's deep voice reached his ears. "We are being watched, señor."

"Who by?" he inquired sharply.

The segundo lifted his shoulders. "In a cantina I saw Pablo and Esteban, drinking. They follow Leroux."

"Hell, Leroux's on the lam. Maybe they quit the lobo."

"It may be so," agreed Andreo doubtfully. "Look!"

He moved through the archway and stood gazing up street. Beside him, eyes questing, Pecos could distinguish nothing but rough adobe walls, the bulging shapes of outdoor ovens, a tracery of shadow. Then he glimpsed a faint spark, pinpointed against the gloom—the glowing tip of a cigaritto.

"So that's the lookout!" he commented. "Maybe we can corral the jasper."

"It is useless," Andreo told him. "I have tried to approach the pelado. Always he vanishes."

Maybe the segundo was right about Leroux, reflected the Texan. The mestizo had likely squeezed the story of the lost treasure out of Gaspar. Whether or not he had planted

the blackleg, he would guess that its ravages had left the Mackenzies penniless. Could be he'd dogged the party to Santa Fe on a hunch that Dolores knew the whereabouts of the gold. The Texan kept these thoughts to himself.

"Forget Leroux!" he told the segundo. "We'll likely be pulling out tomorrow."

But days passed before they rode out of Santa Fe, and Dolores grew daily more restive. When Pecos announced his intention of waiting for a caravan, to ride under its protection, she was openly derisive. "Are we children that we have to be nursed and suckled?" she demanded. "Caravans crawl like the caterpillar. We should ride fast and ride alone."

Pecos had a stubborn streak, too. "Go right ahead," he invited, "if you crave to feed the buzzards. Me, I crave company. And I'm sticking around 'til I find it."

She sniffed with disgust, but waited.

They left with a train of eighteen wagons owned by Long John Elkins, a lank Missourian returning down the trail to Westport. Elkins was a tall, sundried trader. His wagons were loaded with baled wool and hauled by mules. In common with every trader, he was not adverse to the addition of an armed man or two, particularly when they were willing to provide their own ammunition and chuck. Elkins was a veteran of the Trail and took no chances. Every teamster had a rifle stowed handily in his wagon and packed a revolver and sheathed knife.

With daybreak, the long line of white-topped wagons rumbled up the winding grade out of Santa Fe, steadily climbing until the rugged foothills of the Sangre de Cristo range were limned to their left. Westward stretched a vast plateau, prickled with hills, lapping to the blue-shadowed ranges of the Jemez Mountains.

That night the train corralled at the foot of a slope. High above, on a rock, stood the decaying remnants of the

great Pueblo of Pecos, an adobe city peopled by ghosts.

The Texan was smoking a cigarette and eying the ruins high above them when Dolores came by. The girl was in no good humor, irked by the necessity of walking her pony all day when she was in a mood to gallop. "You seem sad, señor," she mocked. "Do you regret your decision to crawl to the Arkansas?"

"Nope," he replied and nodded at the ruins. "Long John's been telling me that thousands of Pueblo Indians once lived up there, friendly folk who spent their time farming, weaving, painting pots. Year after year the Comanches harried them like wolves, killing and enslaving the poor bustards until the few that was left quit the Pueblo and scattered. That jest don't seem right."

"The Comanches are strong, the Pueblos weak," she threw back. "What would you expect?"

"Jest simple justice."

"Justice!" The girl laughed. "Justice goes to him who has the sharpest knife or the deepest purse."

Day after day the wagons crept on, skirting the base of a great flat-topped mesa. It was smiling, peaceful terrain, clothed with scattered piñon and juniper, dotted with the mud huts of peons, patched with flocks of sheep, herds of goats. The train rolled through Tecolate, with its red adobes and white church; crossed the splashing Rio Mora; the rockbound Rio Colorado; passed the mighty bulk of Round Mound. With the dragging days, Dolores' restlessness grew.

"Why are we chained down?" she demanded. "You say you fear the Comanches—I see no Comanches, only wood gatherers and goatherds. You talk of a waterless desert—where is this desert? Sometimes I fear, señor, that you are growing old, and fearful."

Pecos heard her unmoved; he was growing used to Dolores' moods. Maybe, he reflected, he had placed too much credence on teamster stories, but those feathered shafts

sticking out of the dusty Murphys had been mighty convincing.

Three weeks of tedious traveling brought them to the Cimarron, waterless except for scattered mudholes in its sandy bed. Around them there was nothing but flat desert now, a desert that lapped to infinity, destitute of trees or brush, an ocean of withered buffalo grass. The formation of the caravan changed. Now it moved in two parallel columns, with always a rider or two foraging ahead or questing out on the flanks. Pecos inquired the reason for the change.

"Injuns!" a teamster told him laconically.

The weather on the plains was as unstable as a woman, considered Pecos, mindful of Dolores' moods. In the midst of a torrid day, when the sun seemed to sear their very bones, dark clouds were liable to bank, lightning flash, thunder crash in rumbling chorus, while wild winds battered them with a force that threatened to overturn the wagons. A roaring deluge would drum down until the entire plain was afloat and the mules waded in water.

Now almost a month on the trail, the train crept across the trackless Jornada del Muerte. Nothing was visible save dancing motes in the distance that might have been buffalo or wild horses.

Pecos walked his pony beside a wagon, the two vaqueros and pack ponies trailing behind him. Dolores rode ahead, and rode alone, as she had for days, wrapped in a cloak of frigid displeasure.

The Texan, squinting across the waste from beneath the downturned brim of his Stetson, saw one of the motes gradually increase in size, materialize into a racing horseman.

Spurring up to the train, he yelled "Injuns!"

Instantly the two slow-moving columns of wagons quickened to frenzied activity. The leading wagons swung toward each other, met and halted. Those behind converged inward, until the entire train formed a rude oval of close-

packed vehicles, the inside front wheels of each locked against the outside rear wheels of the wagon ahead. Whips crackled, teamsters yelled, chains rattled. Teams were hastily unhooked and run through a gap in the rear of the corral. Wheels were chained together and the gap closed.

By now, what at first had seemed to be a swarm of darting mosquitos, quivering through currents of heated air, took the form of a disorderly array of mounted Indians, hurtling toward them, sunlight glinting upon their lance blades.

The dread Comanche yell pulsated in the Texan's ears, and the pounding of racing ponies' hooves upon the hard ground was like the throbbing of a mighty drum.

Without pause, as they approached the corralled wagons the attackers split, streaming past on all sides—paint-daubed braves, naked except for breech clouts, their long hair streaming, bodies blackened, and features made hideous by daubed vermillion. Each carried a bow in one hand, arrows in the other.

"Comanches!" grunted a teamster stretched out under a wagon near Pecos, "They straddle the finest hossflesh on the plains."

Bellied down, Winchester slanted, the Texan peered between the spokes of a massive wheel. As soon as they came within rifle range, every horseman dropped down on the far side of his drumming pony, hidden except for one bare leg, the foot of which was thrust through a loop of hair braided in the animal's mane.

The ponies' deerskin reins they held in their teeth. Arrows showered upon the wagons as they swept past, loosing the shafts from beneath their ponies' necks.

"They kin loose three of them doggoned arrows afore a man can fire twice," growled the teamster, losing lead.

A cateract of sound flowed into the Texan's ears—the sharp spang of Winchesters, the boom of Sharps buffalo

guns, the vicious swish of speeding arrows, the braying of panicky mules, the yelling of the Comanches, the pounding of hooves—but he was too engrossed with finding and hitting a target to give it attention.

Laying a bead on the bare leg of a brave racing by, he squeezed trigger. The Indian's pony went down in a flurry of dust. Its rider rolled, bounded to his feet. Instantly, another brave swerved toward him. In a flash he had leapt up behind the mounted man and was carried away. Pecos continued shooting, but it was impossible to register the effect on the fast-moving torrent of wild horsemen.

In seconds the surge of action died. The Comanches roared past, the two streams of horsemen melded, halted out of range, a milling band of restive ponies and gesticulating riders. The only evidence of their passing was a scattering of dead and dying ponies, blotching the plain. Every wounded and dead brave had been picked up.

Again hooves thundered as the Comanches hurtled at the wagons a second time, to split as before, but so close now that Pecos could see the whites of their crazed ponies' eyes. Again uproar tortured the air—the angry drone of arrows, crackle of gunfire, yelling of red men and white. More crippled ponies specked the flats, now with painted bodies strewn among them.

The roiling mob of Comanches curveted and circled at a distance, seemingly undecided whether or not to launch a third attack.

Pecos crawled from beneath the wagon and came erect, smearing the sweat and grime off his face. The corral was a dust-clouded turmoil of stampeding mules and cursing men. Several mules were down, transfixed by arrows. Others, crazed by pain, raced around with shafts sticking out of their hides. A bearded teamster was propped against a wagon wheel, an arrow skewering his right shoulder. Long John strode through the confusion, striving to restore or-

der. Dolores and Gaspar stood eyeing a form stretched on the ground. Pecos glanced at the brown features, saw that the prone man was Andreo and hurried over. The segundo lay on his back, sightless eyes staring, an arrow sunk deep in his chest.

"So they got him!" he said soberly. He'd miss Andreo. The segundo was the closest approach to a friend he'd found on the Barbed M. The stocky Mexican had been loyal, dependable and devoted to the spread. Now he had died for it.

Alarmed shouts and a rush to the western side of the corral distracted his attention. Men crowded between the wagons, gazing over the plain. The Texan joined them. Like an elongated serpent, a long line of fire crept in their direction, consuming the sun-dried grass. Above it drifted a thickening smoke haze. Beyond, ghostly through the smoke, Indians galloped wildly back and forth.

XVIII

SEEMED THEY were in a jackpot, reflected Pecos. There was no stopping that fire. When it reached the wagons packed with wool, they would blaze like punk. If Long John decided to hitch up and pull out, the slow-moving train would be a sitting duck on the open plain. Deadly arrows would quickly cripple the teams and the wagons would be stranded, strung out, defenseless. Behind the corralled Murphys, twenty or more men made an effective defense force. On the move,

one to a wagon, the yelling horde would overwhelm them.

As he watched, the long crackling line of fire perceptibly crept closer. Without benefit of a breeze it moved slowly, but as inexorably as fate. The whole plain was clothed with a mat of the short, withered grass. Tinder-dry, it burned readily. Close-tied to wagon wheels around the corral, the mules kicked and plunged in growing frenzy. The acrid stench of smoke was already heavy on the air.

The Texan saw Long John, standing alone, gnawing the ends of the sun-faded moustache that drooped over his lips, and braced the lank wagon master. "Seems we're holding a busted flush," he observed.

"You said it!" agreed Elkins somberly. "Sure hate to lose these wagons, but seems we got no option but to ditch 'em and skeedaddle. There's jest one chance, a mighty slim one at that."

"Such as?" prompted Pecos.

Elkins swung around and pointed southward, in the direction of the Cimarron. Unnoticed by most in the excitement, clouds were banking black against the sky. "Storm's working up," said the wagon master. "They kin break mighty sudden. I hope to Gawd this one breaks afore that fire licks my wagon wheels." With that, he strode away.

Smoke fogged the wagons now, thickening as the serpentine line of fire writhed closer. The corral was a confusion of cursing teamsters and hoof-lashing mules as the men strove to lash packs on the backs of some animals, rudely contrived saddles on others. Pecos unconsciously chewed a cold cigarette to shreds, watching them. He just didn't like to picture twenty or so men, forking unmanagable mules, bucking several hundred yelling Comanches on the plain. Once out in the open they'd have no more show than a calf herd harried by wolves. But Long John had no option; it was run or roast, and, judging from the smoke, that prairie fire was drawing almighty close.

Again he stepped between two wagons and peered out. The crackling barrier of flame was not more than a hundred paces distant now, stretching away to north and south, a scarlet thread on the gray flats, until hidden by the billowing smoke. Dodging kicking mules and hurrying men, he moved to the far side of the corral. Here the smoke thinned as it drifted, revealing a more deadly enemy. The Comanches well knew they would have to make a run for it and were set to cut them to pieces. The entire band seemed to be out there. Savage horsemen raced around in circles, dashing in and out, loosing arrows at the wagons; others bunched, whooping and shaking their lances. There just didn't seem to be any out.

Turning back to the confusion of the corral, he located Dolores standing by the head of her nervous pony, one hand grasping its headstall. With the other she held the reins of his dun. Gaspar, nearby, was fighting to control his own mount and cling to the halters of three fiddle-footing pack animals.

"So we travel with a caravan for safety!" she threw derisively at him when he jingled up.

"Quit squawking and listen!" he returned curtly. "Elkins is making a break, with his teamsters. They'll straddle mules and likely hit south, away from the fire. There's a scad of Comanches out there, itching to rip into 'em. We hold back—"

"And burn to death?"

"Nope, until they're clear. Then we hit north." He indicated the smoke-fogged plain to the north. "We ride through the smoke, along the fire line. I'm gambling that the Comanches will be so busy cutting up Elkins' bunch that we'll slip through. Like I said, it's a gamble, but," he shrugged, "we join Elkins' bunch we got no more chance than a snowball in hell."

The girl nodded. He had to hand it to her; she was a

thoroughbred. Most women would have the shrieking heebie-jeebies. Her voice was as steady and her features as composed as though they were sitting on the gallery of the Barbed M.

Roiling cloud masses had now blanked out the sun. Combined with the smoke pall, they cloaked the scene with spectral gloom.

Pecos heard Elkins' hoarse shout. Mounted on lunging, bucking mules, the teamsters began streaming through a gap where a wagon had been pulled aside in an unruly cavalcade. In minutes, the little party from Poroso Valley was left alone except for mules, broken loose, stampeding blindly around through the swirling smoke.

From out on the plain to the east came the spluttering report of firearms, shrill Comanche yells, the scream of a stricken man. Wagons were burning down one side of the corral now, yellow flames licking up the canvas covers. The heat grew, smoke stung Pecos' eyes, bit into his throat.

"Let's go!" he shouted, and stepped into leather. Tailed by the girl and Gaspar with the pack ponies, he headed for the gap in the corral. Across the plain, sounds of conflict still floated to their ears, but the fate of Elkins and his men was hidden by drifting smoke. Pecos angled north, working toward the fire line. Smoke blinded him. Behind, he could hear the girl coughing and choking.

A deafening thunderclap hit his ears; lightning stabbed through the murk with blinding intensity; rain drummed down in a thrumming monotone. Storm-battered mites on the expanse of the Jornada de Muerte, the three plugged blindly across the plain.

The storm passed as abruptly as it had erupted. A pallid moon floated through tattered remnants of cloud, revealing nothing but water-soaked emptiness around. Pecos reined up his pony and eyed his sodden companions. "Wal," he said, "we made it." He yanked out a soggy tobacco

sack, eyed it with disgust, dropped it back into a wet pocket. "Too bad about Elkins and the boys," he mused. "If they could have stuck around another fifteen minutes that storm would have saved 'em."

Dolores reached down, gathered the saturated folds of her skirt with both hands, wrung them out. She straightened, brushed back the damp tresses of her raven hair. "Well," she said, "we're alive! What do we do to stay alive?"

Pecos dismounted, pacing through sticky mud to restore circulation in his cramped limbs. "Wal, according to Elkins this desert stretches for sixty miles from the Cimarron to the Arkansas. I figure we've covered forty-five, maybe more. We can't camp, we can't make a fire with Comanches around. I'd say ride on."

"Well, what are we waiting for?" she inquired.

When the red ball of the sun slid above the horizon, the three riders, as gaunted as their ponies, emerged from sandhills and drew rein on the bank of a wide, shallow stream, placidly flowing over broad bands of sand. Its banks were bare of vegetation. Stunted cottonwoods sat like sentinels on small islands that dotted its surface. The ground was crisscrossed with buffalo trails and cumbered with their skeletons, but there was not a buffalo in sight, not any living thing, save a solitary heron winging upstream.

"I guess this is the Arkansas," commented Pecos. "Such as it is!"

"Si, señor," returned Gaspar. The vaquero smiled tiredly, "I thank the Blessed Saints that they spared us to behold it."

Already there was warming heat in the air.

"If you men will withdraw," said Dolores, "I'd like to strip off these clammy clothes and get into something dry. Then I intend to stretch out and sleep, Comanche or no Comanche." Her voice dragged with weariness, her features were haggard with fatigue.

"Better pull back into the sandhills," suggested Pecos. "Guess we could all use a little shut-eye." They wheeled away from the river, walking their mounts across waves of sand ridges, gleaming white in the rays of the rising sun.

But a fever of impatience possessed the girl. Before noon she was shaking the men back to wakefulness. "There will be time for sleep when we return to Santa Fe," she urged. "Is the wagon near, Gaspar?"

The vaquero sat up, yawning. "I do not know, señorita," he confessed. "We have wandered far from the beaten trail. I think we should ride to the west."

"Then let us ride!"

As they rode steadily upstream, Pecos decided that the Arkansas River was overrated. Eternally, it seemed, the stream snaked across a desolate plain, confined by low, steep banks. Often it shallowed to such an extent that a man could have waded across it. Undulating sandhills flanked it on the south side, along which they rode, their ponies plodding through yielding sand. At their approach, an occasional shaggy buffalo lumbered into these hills. Beyond that, there was no life, no trees, no chaparral to relieve the desolation.

Across stream, the skeletons of animals and the remnants of broken-down wagons marked the regular Santa Fe Trail that followed the river for over a hundred miles.

It was late afternoon before they found what they sought—the gray-weathered remains of a spring wagon, sunk axle-deep in the river sand a dozen paces beyond the crumbled bank. Strips of rotting canvas still clung to the bows and the river lapped placidly against its bed. Disintegrating skeletons, half-buried in quicksand, marked the four-mule team. A glance revealed that the wagon was empty, the bed bare.

"Quick, Gaspar!" exclaimed Dolores, her voice high-pitched with excitement. "The axe!"

The vaquero stepped down, plodded to a pack mule and worried a long-handled axe from beneath the canvas cover. He handed it to the Texan, then stolidly began gathering debris from the margin of the river and buffalo chips. An armful of fuel gathered, he ignited it with flint and steel.

Meanwhile Pecos waded into the stream, axe in hand. Water rose to his knees as he crunched over the sandy bottom. Reaching the wagon, he eyed the bed. It was constructed of pine planks, nailed down, not the customary hard oak, neatly dovetailed. Inserting the edge of the axe beneath the end of a plank, he levered. Harshly squealing, the rusted nails gave and the plank came up.

On the bank Dolores stood, hands unconsciously clasped together, rigid with anticipation.

A space perhaps six inches deep yawned below the loosened plank. Underneath, the real wagon bottom showed. Eagerly now, the Texan levered up another plank and fumbled beneath the false bottom. His fingers touched buckskin. He lifted out a pouch. Fingers shaky with excitement, he tore off the rawhide thong that secured its neck and spilled a stream of glittering gold coins into a palm.

The girl shrieked with joy, eyes shining.

The Texan nodded, busy pulling out more and more pouches. "Like you said," he drawled, "your paw's sure wallowing in velvet."

The stack of pouches on the wagon bed grew. On the bank behind them a pony suddenly whickered. Pecos' head swiveled. A wavering finger of smoke from the camp fire Gaspar had started curled high in the air.

Pecos smothered an oath and splashed to the bank. Running to the fire, he began kicking it apart. "You loco?" he threw at the vaquero. "You crave to bring a pack of Injuns down on us?"

"A thousand pardons, señor," quavered Gaspar. "I did not think."

"Pack that gold from the wagon," directed the Texan. He stepped to the dun and slid his Winchester out of the boot. The rifle slanted upon an arm, he trudged up the slope of the nearest sandhill. Standing on its crest, he searched the terrain. The sun had dropped low, patching the dunes with shadow. Nothing moved beyond a flight of birds whirling low. Below, Gaspar and the girl were packing pouches of gold toward one of the pack mules. Maybe that whicker didn't mean anything, he thought, but something had scared up the birds. They had to get out, and get out fast. He'd give his right arm for sight of a caravan.

XIX

UNEASY IN MIND, the Texan trudged down the slope of the dune and approached Dolores, who was carefully stowing fat pouches in a kyack.

"What do you think now of my loco notion, señor?" she inquired, with faint mockery.

"A world-beater," he replied, "if the Injuns don't lift our hair. I got a notion they're skulking around. We got to pull out—pronto."

"As you wish," she replied indifferently, and glanced past him toward the river. He was amazed to see her jaw slacken, her eyes dilate with startled surprise. He spun around. Not a dozen paces distant, four sombreros protruded

above the river bank; beneath them were swarthy faces and leveled guns. He dabbed for his .44, checked at sound of Leroux's smooth tones behind him.

"It is hopeless, señor. Would you have the señorita die, too?" He wheeled. Colt leveled, the ex-caporal stood on the far side of the mule. The mestizo's tone hardened, "Reach!"

Slowly, Pecos raised his hands shoulder high.

"Pablo, Estivan!" barked Leroux. Two vaqueros scrambled up the river bank and hurried toward them. "Disarm the Texan," directed Leroux. "Tie them both."

Pecos stood fuming and helpless, the gun lined on his chest while a vaquero reached around him, slipped the buckle of his gunbelt and swung it off. Lashing his wrists behind him with a length of rawhide rope and roping his ankles together, they casually toppled him over and turned to the girl.

She fought them off with clawing fingers. Hog-tied, the Texan watched the two wrestle her down, but not before her fingernails had beaded their fares with scratches. They wrenched her arms behind her and tightened a rope around her slim wrists. One pinned down her flailing legs while the other secured her ankles. Panting, she lay trussed.

Leroux whistled, a long shrill note. A fifth vaquero rode out of the sandhills, the saddle horses of the gang stringing behind him. The mestizo bent and picked up two pouches that had fallen from the girl's hands. One he tossed carelessly into the kyack. The other he opened. Cupidity gleaming in their dark eyes, his followers crowded him as he spilled the contents of the pouch into a palm. With a grin he scattered the gleaming coins. There was a scrambling rush. The vaqueros dropped down on hands and knees, searching for the coins on the sandy ground.

Pecos, watching, saw that Gaspar had joined them. It was all plain enough now. The Mexican had double-crossed them throughout. Likely he'd passed word to Leroux about

the projected search before they left the Barbed M. The mestizo and his gang had dogged them to Santa Fe, and then pushed ahead, waiting on the river for their arrival. That fire was no accident, but a signal. It was as neat a trap as had ever been sprung.

The sun sank in scarlet splendor. Sandhills and river began to fade behind the darkening veil of approaching night. Distant shouting, the squealing complaint of ungreased axles, floated to the Texan's ears. Eagerly, he levered to a sitting position, staring across the broad stream. Dim in the dying light, horsemen came into view, behind them the leading wagon of a train, rumbling behind slow-moving oxen. Even as the yell left his throat, the vaqueros began shouting, drowning it out, waving their arms at the passing wagons. The leading rider raised a hand in greeting, and passed on. Hopelessly, the prisoner watched a long procession of white-topped wagons roll past and disappear from view behind settling dust. There was the wagon train he craved, he thought, with weary hopelessness; like the storm on the Jornada del Muerte, it was a trifle late.

The Mexicans gathered buffalo chips and started a fire, clustered around it, smoking and jabbering. Lying in the gloom, Pecos could see the dark outline of Dolores' form nearby. Face to the ground, she had lain silent and motionless since her capture. It was real tough for a girl, he reflected. The wealth she'd endured so much to recover had been snatched from her hands at the moment of triumph. It must have been a numbing blow.

But he was more concerned with survival than gold. And the chance of survival seemed mighty slim. He just couldn't see how Leroux could afford to let them live. Their evidence could hang him. Dead, there was no one to dispute possession of the gold. It would be easy to slit their throats and leave their bodies in the sandhills. What the wolves

left wouldn't be worth mentioning. Seemed they had drawn a dead man's hand.

He fought to free his arms, twisting and jerking, but the tough rawhide merely bit deeper into the flesh. Finally he quit, realizing the futility of struggle. Up river, the wolves were howling and he guessed the train had halted and made camp. Wolves always hung around the caravans.

He saw Leroux rise from the circle around the fire, saunter to the saddles stacked close by, slide two bottles out of a saddlebag, pack them back to the fire. Eager hands were extended. The bottles passed around and were speedily emptied and cast aside.

Stars prickled the heavens now. The prisoner became aware that the hubbub around the fire had died down. A strange drowsiness seemed to have settled on the vaqueros. All but one were stretched out, apparently sleeping. Only Leroux hunkered, awake. That drink must have been mighty potent, reflected Pecos. He saw Leroux straighten, move around, looking the recumbent men over. Then he strolled toward the prisoners. His form vague in the starlight, he stood looking them over.

"That liquor must have packed more kick than a mule," said Pecos. "I'd say them jaspers are as drunk as fiddlers' clerks."

"Doped, not drunk," corrected the mestizo.

"Doped!" repeated the Texan.

"Why should Manuel Leroux share his gold with a pack of pelados?" returned the other. "I am a clever man, señor. I put what you call the knockout drops in the tequilla. When they awaken I shall be many miles distant."

"How about the gal and me?"

Leroux sighed. "I am afraid, señor," he said sadly, "I must slit your throats before I leave. I would be merciful and put you out of your misery now, but the caravan has corralled just beyond the bend. I may have visitors.

When the wagons leave at dawn, I will join them. You, alas, will remain."

"For the wolves?"

The mestizo smiled.

Pecos lay watching him return to the fire, feed more buffalo chips to the reddening coals and hunker again.

The girl rolled close. "So that spawn of the devil is alone," she whispered tightly.

"And we're hog-tied," returned Pecos low-voiced. "Guess you heard everything."

"I heard enough, señor. Can you use your hands?"

"The fingers maybe, but that rawhide's clamped on my wrists."

"Mine, too," she said wryly. "Listen, I have the stiletto beneath a garter, on my right leg. I can't reach it, but you could."

"Finger under your dress, ma'am?"

"Or die like a stuck pig," she snapped. "That stiletto is our only hope." She wriggled around until her right side was pressed against him. "Now!" she whispered urgently.

Back to the girl, he groped with his fingers. The haft of the slender blade gripped in one hand, he located the rawhide thong circling the girl's wrists, with his free fingers. Setting the edge of the blade against it, he began sawing . . . . She wrenched her wrists free, rolled over and grasped the stiletto. In seconds, she had freed the Texan, too.

He lay prone, rubbing his galled wrists and eyeing Leroux's squatting form silhouetted against the firelight, his followers lumping unmoving around him. He sighted his gunbelt on the stack of saddles.

"Listen," he whispered. "I'll go get my gun."

Stiletto in her right hand, the girl nodded.

He wormed away, bellied to the ground, working around toward the stacked saddles, watching Leroux's hunched form from the corner of an eye. He was nearing the saddles

when he became aware that another dark form was creeping up on the mestizo. Firelight glimmered upon oval features and streaming black hair. Dolores was stalking the mestizo. Mentally, he cursed her impatience. She was no match for the renegade. The rustle of her dress, the snapping of a twig, and Leroux would spin around and blast her while his own gun was still out of reach.

Helpless to interfere, he froze, watching the stealthily-moving form. Leroux nodded, half dozing. The girl came in slowly, now scarcely moving. She raised upon a knee behind the ex-caporal. Firelight flashed upon naked steel. A shriek of agony lanced into the Texan's ears. The mestizo jerked to his feet, half-turned, swaying. The dripping stiletto ripped into his belly with a slashing upward stroke.

Leroux dropped, writhing feebly.

Pecos jumped to his feet, leaped for the saddles and swept up his gunbelt. Buckling it around his middle, he ran to the fire.

The girl was wiping the bloody blade upon the dead man's velvet coat. "He is a dog," she said, her voice devoid of feeling. "He deserved to die like a dog. His flesh will poison the buzzards."

The Texan breathed deeply. He just couldn't figure Dolores. She was a strange combination of seduction and savagery, tenderness and temper. He guessed it was the mixture of blood. But she pulled him stronger than any magnet.

"I guess," he said, "we'll get out of here. There's a caravan around the bend of the river."

Forty-three days after they had left Santa Fe they rode back, having found what they sought.

Pecos wondered at the change in Dolores after they had recovered the gold. It was hard to believe that this laughing, light-hearted girl could have stabbed a man to death. She was as friendly as a kitten and excited as a schoolgirl.

They headed for the casa near the church. The girl decided that they would linger in town for a few days. She had clothes to buy, she insisted, and she needed rest after the rigors of the trip. And Pecos must stay at the house, too. They would not be alone. Marta could act as duenna. There was Emilia, the daughter, too. She could not do him less honor. Had he not recovered the gold and enriched her?

The Texan had no objection. The beds in the Mackenzie casa were comfortable and the food good.

That first night, after a turn around the Plaza and a few drinks, he returned to the house in genial mood and sought his bedroom. From habit on the trail, he merely yanked off his boots, hung his gunbelt within reach and flopped on top of the bed covers.

A rough hand shook him awake. Sleep-drugged, he sat up and blinked into the light of a lantern. Two tough-looking deputies stood beside the bed. One held his gunbelt.

"What in thunder's all this about?" he mumbled.

"You're under arrest, Parker," grunted one.

"For what? I jest rode into town."

"With McMinns and Haney's caravan?"

"Sure!"

"That's what the girl claims. You're wanted for murder."

Pecos swung his legs off the bed, shook his head to clear it and convince himself that this was not a nightmare.

"You hombres are loco," he snapped.

"Mebbe," returned one deputy, "but that's what the warrant says—the murder of Thomas Mackenzie, owner of the Barbed M. Guttman, his son-in-law, swore it out."

XX

AGAIN PECOS WAS brought before the Capitán Bautista, in the prison wing of the Old Governor's Palace. The heavy-paunched, bull-necked Bautista was more grossly fat than ever, and still reeked of scent.

"The wolf cannot change his nature," commented the Capitán philosophically, eyeing the prisoner. "He kills, kills, kills. Before, you were accused of a shooting at a baile, and were exonerated by the gracious Señorita Mackenzie. To express your gratitude you knife her father, a man lying helpless on a bed of pain." His triple chins quivered as he shook his head with distaste. "Have you anything to say?"

"Plenty!" barked the Texan. "I'm fresh off the Trail. I haven't been near the Barbed M for two months or more. The Señorita Mackenzie will back my word. You tangled your spurs."

"The Señor Mackenzie has been dead for over two months," returned Bautista blandly. "The allegations are interesting, perhaps I should read them." He consulted a document before him.

"Señor Carl Guttman, a respected citizen and a man of wealth, whose veracity no man would doubt, states that you persuaded the Señorita Dolores to discharge the caporal of the Barbed M and appoint yourself in his place. From her you doubtless learned that the Mackenzie fortune had been transported down the Santa Fe Trail in the spring of last year. It appears that the wagon in which it was concealed was abandoned on the Arkansas River. Those who escorted it were slain by Comanches, with the exception of one Gaspar. It is alleged that you seduced the señorita, persuaded

her to accompany you on a search for the treasure, with Gaspar as guide."

The Capitan paused to dab a silk handkerchief to his lips. "You spent ten days in Santa Fe, during which time you stole back to the ranch and knifed Thomas Mackenzie, doubtless considering that a gunshot would arouse the household. Having ruthlessly murdered the father, you left for the Arkansas River with the unsuspecting daughter. There, she informs me, you recovered the dinero." He frowned. "You possibly contemplated killing the girl also, or did you merely plan to flee with the Mackenzie gold?"

"All hogwash!" interjected the prisoner. "Where is Dolores? She'll clear me."

"The señorita is desolated by the news of her father's death and, I believe, is now at her ranch." The Capitán sighed gustily, "You are now accused of two murders, since the señorita undoubtedly understands she was in error when she attested that you were innocent of the baile killing. A confession would simplify matters!"

Protest wouldn't get him anywhere, thought the prisoner. And where would he get proof if Dolores refused to talk? And who was behind this frame-up?

"So Guttman pointed the finger at me," he commented. "How come he took a hand?"

"Señor Guttman is the only surviving male relative," returned the Capitán severely. "It is his duty. It chanced that he rode over to the Barbed M the day following the killing. Here he learned to his horror that Thomas Mackenzie had been foully murdered, and that you and the Señorita Mackenzie had previously left for Santa Fe. He was bewildered, until one Juan Hernandez, a vaquero, revealed that he had stepped out of the bunkhouse after midnight, to satisfy Nature's call, and observed you stealing away from the house."

"The hombre's crazy as popcorn!" barked Pecos.

Bautista continued, unabashed, "The Señor Guttman immediately informed the sheriff of Solano County. When the sheriff arrived in Santa Fe you had already left with the wagons of Elkins, the trader. We have been waiting patiently for your return."

The Capitán laced plump fingers and smiled benignly. "I'm afraid, Señor Gunfighter, that you will swing—very high."

To the deputy standing behind Pecos, he said shortly, "Take him away!"

Battling anger, allied with bewilderment, the Texan paced the cell where he was held in solitary confinement. Scarcely ten paces in length and breadth, it held a bench covered by a filthy mattress and a bucket, nothing more. Faint light filtered through a narrow slit of a window, high on a wall. It had all the aspects of a tomb.

Intuition told the prisoner that Guttman was behind this. The sheepman hated his guts. As long as Mackenzie lived he had no chance of grabbing the Barbed M. His attempt to gain possession by means of a forged note had failed. When the crippled owner had lain unguarded he had seen his chance, and seized it.

As half-owner, through his submissive wife, he would run his sheep in the Valley. What was more, he had an unexpected bonus—he'd share in the wealth that had been recovered on the Arkansas. The testimony of Hernandez, the vaquero, was doubtless bought and paid for. Carl Guttman was riding high.

It was one thing, considered the Texan moodily, to dream up theories about the killing, and another to prove them. Lacking Dolores' testimony he was doomed. Any jury in the Territory would convict him. He was tagged a gunman, with a reputation for killing.

Why had Dolores quit him? The girl was fiery, quick-tempered, impetuous, but he'd always figured she was the

type a man could tie to and trust. Hadn't he sided her on the Barbed M, saved her life in the Comanche attack, helped recover the Mackenzie gold? He gritted his teeth with angry frustration. How Lady Luck must have laughed when he first rode into Santa Fe and tangled in this spider-web.

Days passed, dragging days, each an eternity of suspense. He saw no one, not even the jailor who pushed his meals through a trap in the door. Then the hours of tortured monotony were broken by a visitor—the cell door rasped open and Dolores entered, elegant and disdainful as always, exquisite as a scarlet cactus blossom, a filmy mantilla flowing over her head and shoulders.

The door closed behind her, but the prisoner could see the jailor's eyes gleaming behind the peephole.

Unshaven, heavy-eyed and bitter, he stood glaring at her.

"Where you been hiding out?" he demanded.

She shrugged, the old mockery in her dark eyes. "Where I belong—at the Barbed M."

"And left me to rot! You heard the charge? They claim I rubbed your paw out."

She nodded.

"You know it's a frame-up," he accused harshly. "This Hernandez hairpin is pitching windies. You clear me."

"I have cleared you!" she returned with cool hauteur.

He stiffened, eyeing her closely, forehead creased.

Her voice softened. "I should have come before, señor, but I was needed in the Valley—to disprove this foolish charge. Hernandez is a lying dog—he has confessed all to the policia. Carl Guttman, the sheepherder," her tone curdled with disgust, "paid him to lie. You will remember my father's nurse, Maria. She was sleeping on a mat in a corner of the bedroom. She awoke and saw everything as she lay paralyzed with terror. Carl did not see her."

"So Guttman beefed him!"

"Yes, Guttman!" She pronounced the word as though it was a curse.

"He denied everything," the girl resumed, "but even Juanita has turned against him. She testified that he rode out that night after sundown and did not return until morning. Further, there was blood on his shirt—my father's blood."

"They arrest the sidewinder?"

"Yesterday the policia brought him to this jail, with irons on his wrists. He will hang!"

Unable to remain still, Pecos began pacing the cell with short, jerky steps. He checked suddenly, swung to face her. "Then why are they holding me?"

"You are free to go!" she told him coolly.

Bitter eyes questioning, he strode to the door, grasped the wooden knob, swung it open. Still unconvinced, he stood, eyeing the girl. This was just a mite too easy.

"You giving me your word I can walk out—a free man?" he persisted.

"Follow me!" she challenged, and swept through the doorway. Wracked by hope and doubt, he dogged her. She led the way to the Capitán's office.

Bautista, seated at his desk, looked up, smiled amiably and heaved to his feet. Pecos asked no questions and received no explanations as the plump Capitán laid his gunbelt, Stetson and wallet on the desk.

"Señor," said Bautista, darting an admiring glance at Dolores, "you are wan lucky man."

"You think I don't know it," growled the Texan, and buckled on his gunbelt.

Many heads turned as the two walked across the Plaza, heading for the Mackenzie casa—a beautiful, richly-garbed señorita and a dirty, unshaven Americano. Neither exchanged a word. The girl, head held high, was cloaked with a stiff

reserve. Pecos was still trying to convince himself that it was not all a dream.

At the house she left him, still unspeaking. He borrowed a bucket of hot water from Marta, sponged himself off, shaved and began to feel that he was living again. He stepped out into the courtyard. Several ponies were tied to the rings in the adobe wall, among them the saddled dun. He was tightening the cinches on the dun when Dolores sauntered through the doorway, dressed now in riding garb.

"You are leaving?" she inquired.

"Yep!" he replied forcefully. "I'm heading back to Texas —God's country."

"You do not like New Mexico?"

"It jest don't agree with my health." Awkwardly, he added, "And I'm sure thanking you for aceing me out of that tight. I reckon things will run smooth at the Barbed M from now on."

"I shall not return to the Barbed M, I shall go away—to Texas, I think." She toyed with the dun's headstall.

Pecos eyed her with quick surprise.

"It is a long journey for a girl—you will escort me?"

He smiled. So she was up to her tantalizing tricks again. "Quit funning!" he said tolerantly.

"I am ready!" Dolores' mocking smile had fled; her soft lips quivered; there was desperate appeal in the dark eyes that met his.

Scarce daring to believe, he extended his arms. She flung into them, clinging, her lips searching for his. After awhile, he whispered, "You crave I should hunt up a padre?"

"Sí, querido!" she said softly.

Stirrup to stirrup, the two jogged down the trail, the adobes of Santa Fe fading in distance. Pecos eyed the two heavily laden pack ponies. "You sure got plenty baggage," he commented.

Her dark eyes mocked him. "See! He bullies me already. One pony, my husband, carries my personal belongings; the other, my dowry."

"Dowry?"

"The gold!"

"You forgot Juanita?"

"We have agreed. Juanita will take the ranch, I the dinero. Gold," she added thoughtfully, "was Carl's heart's desire. It took him to the hangman."

"And yours?"

"Is riding beside me," she said softly. "He is taking me to Paradiso."

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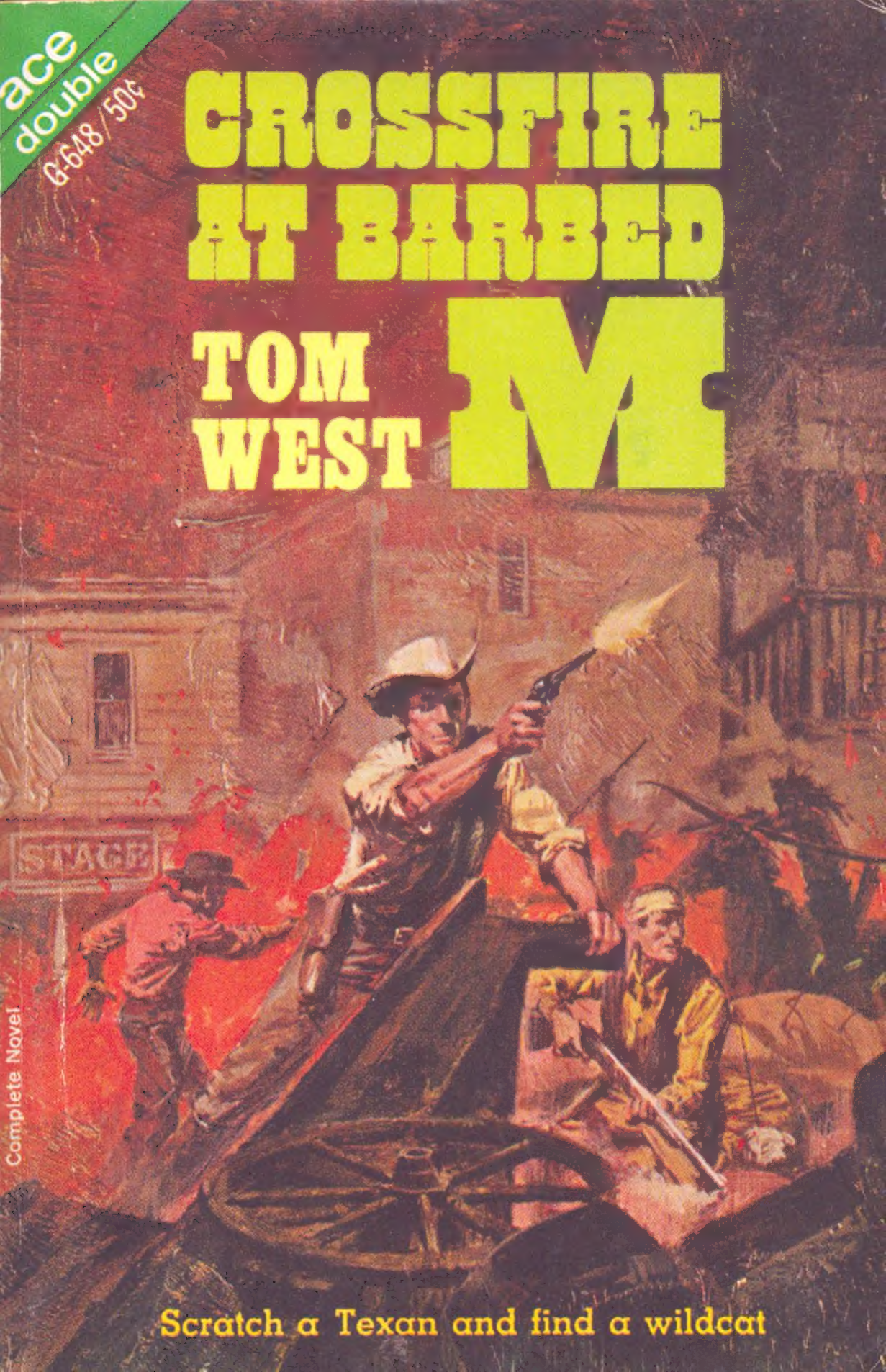

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